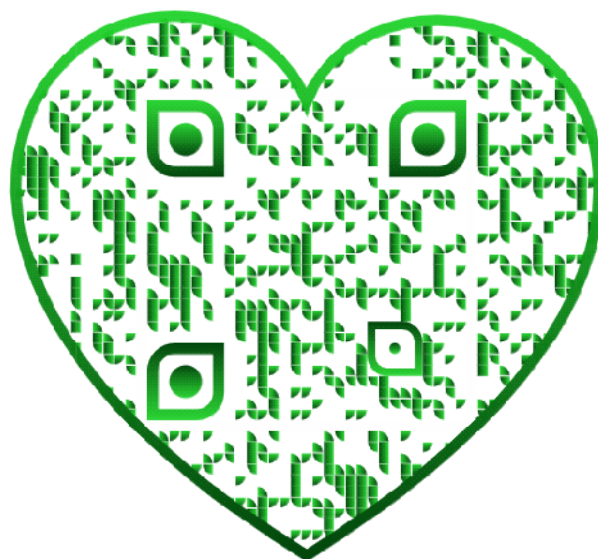


TAHOMA/MT. RAINIER DAVID GLADISH

Alpinist 88



TORANOSUKE NAGAYAMA **BORROWS GEAR**
TOM LIVINGSTONE **TAKES THE HIGH ROUTE**
VEN POPOV **CLIMBS LA-SUM WITH FRIENDS**
SHARA ZAIA **TRACES CONTOURS OF IDENTITY**



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Sean Villanueva O'Driscoll working the 7b roof pitch on the first free ascent of Riders on the Storm in Torres del Paine, Patagonia. It is pitch 26 out of 44.
Photo: Drew Smith

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📷 A rare sight in mixed climbing. Andres Marin placing a #5 cam while climbing the route *Super Crack* (M7) near Ouray, CO. AAC member Felipe Tapia Nordenflycht

BD Athlete Jackson Marvell swinging his Hydra prototypes high on the North Face of Jannu.

📷 Matt Cornell



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Round Trip Ticket (M7 AI5+ A0). North Face of Jannu, Nepal.

 **Black Diamond**

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48 Mountain Profile: Tahoma/Mt. Rainier

For thousands of years, Indigenous peoples have traveled to what has been known as Takhoma, Tahoma, təqʷubəʔ and many other names, drawn to the resources available among the mountain's verdant valleys and slopes. It wasn't until 1792 that Captain George Vancouver saw the peak from a distance and gave it a new name: Mt. Rainier. Soon after, the mountain began captivating a different kind of visitor, the recreational climber. Herein, David Gladish considers the history of the influential mountain and how it has shaped those drawn to it. Meanwhile, Holly Yu Tung Chen, Chris Weidner and Cal' Smith share stories of their own.

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In 2008, two of the famous Giri-Giri Boys disappeared near the top of the Cassin Ridge after enchainning the Kahiltna Peaks. This past May, three members of a new generation of Japanese alpinists set out to follow in their footsteps. But their gear was stolen along the way. Toranosuke Nagayama tells the story.

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Tom Livingstone and Aleš Česen set out to answer a question: What would it be like to climb a technically difficult route at nearly 8000 meters? Livingstone describes the delightful suffering they enjoyed on the west ridge of Gasherbrum III (7958m).

[Cover] Ed Boulton hunkers down in a storm while climbing Mt. Rainier's Willis Wall with Jim Wickwire, 1971. It was a harrowing experience. "I never climbed with Ed again, but I remember what he did to get me off Mt. Rainier," Wickwire wrote in *Addicted to Danger*. "Ed Boulton saved my life." Jim Wickwire | [This Page] Toranosuke Nagayama rappelling on the Kahiltna Peaks, Alaska. Genya Takenaka

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[Photo] Sean Warren aids a wet pitch on Greenland's Mirror Wall. Warren, Julia Cassou, Pete Whittaker and Sean Villanueva O'Driscoll spent more than a month sailing and climbing around Greenland in 2024. They established a new route on Mirror Wall and named it Ryu-Shin (5.13d R A2+, 1000m), honoring their late friend Keita Kurakami. Julia Cassou

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THE SHARP END

Navigating a Crack of Doom | Derek Franz

EGO IS A SLIPPERY, strangely powerful thing. To be alive is to have an ego. There is no avoiding it. Any climber worth their salt must understand their relationship with ego. It affects not only the individual but also those around them, even the environment and future generations, a ring of ripple effects.

IN SEPTEMBER 2023, I stopped at City of Rocks, Idaho, for a few days. I'd never been to the historic climbing area before, though I'd read about it for years. One of the area's most famous routes is Crack of Doom on Morning Glory Spire; it might have been the first 5.11c in the United States when Greg Lowe climbed it in 1965. A host of other testpieces abound on that rock alone, and I hoped to try them all. But I was solo and couldn't be certain if I'd meet anyone to climb with.

I still remember the buzz I felt when I pulled into the campsite and finally got to touch the fine-grained granite with its huecos and patinaed edges for the first time. A large rectangular boulder bordered the site, complete with a flat landing. I spent that first evening getting a feel for the texture and style of the place, piecing together every conceivable line on the block, fully content.

In the morning I packed a bag and set off on a walkabout to deepen my understanding of the City, soloing easy routes on as many formations as I could. I soon encountered a group of three talented climbers who invited me to climb with them over the following days.

On my last day, I found myself with a supportive partner and an opportunity to try some of the harder routes on Morning Glory Spire. A pair of young Germans were already racking up for Crack of Doom, so I went around the corner and grit my way up the rowdy, spooky arête of Strategic Defense (5.11c/d, 100'). My feet occasionally paddled for purchase on the rounded stone between the five widely spaced bolts, but I got to the top without falling. "One of the first 'sport' routes at the City," writes guidebook author Dave Bingham, who completed the first ascent in 1986. *Whew!* I was grateful to have put in time on the easy free solos.

When I returned to the ground, the Germans were battling the upper fissure on Crack of Doom, learning how to wedge their hands and fists properly. Apparently the crux boulder problem that guards entry to the crack—which starts as a fingertip seam—was no sweat for them. Instead it was the 5.9 jamming that had them power grunting. Despite the struggle, both sent. I waited in the shade off to the side, not wanting to spoil the chance for something closer to a true onsight experience (not knowing anything about the moves).

When at last it was my turn, the morning sun was just starting to kiss the opening crux: a puzzling traverse in from the left around a bulge about ten feet above jagged boulders. There's no protection to be had until you clip a jangly piton where the seam starts. "Most mortals stick-clip the pin," Bingham's 2016 guidebook reads. My partner, a local, encouraged me to pre-clip the piton. After a brief up-and-down reconnaissance, I discovered how committing and off-balance the unknown sequence would be just to reach the pin at waist level, so I agreed.

"It is better style to not stick-clip!" said one of the Germans, half my age with bronzed flexing muscles. I nodded. He repeated it, as if trying to provoke a reaction.

What they couldn't understand was that there was a bigger picture at stake for me. I have already broken bones in the name of pride, and I've become increasingly aware that even minor injuries present a burden to my wife, family, friends and colleagues: medical bills, time off work, months of diminished physical ability, a grumpier temperament—all for what? It would only take one miscalculation, one slip on granite that was becoming warmer and slipperier by the minute, and my little excursion could end in a bad way.

Moments later I was cruising up the hand crack, hardly caring that I marred my "onsight" by stick-clipping the wiggly piton. The key word is *hardly*. If the pin hadn't been there, perhaps I would have chickened out, but then I would've had more motivation to return when I felt ready. Or I could have swallowed my pride entirely and set up a top rope.

The self-assurance and commitment that a person must summon are what makes these climbs more rewarding. Strategic Defense wouldn't be as memorable if it had bolts every six feet. Some people are sure to argue that it was established as a "sport climb," so why not update it according to current expectations? Isn't it egotistical to artificially preserve contrived risks? Why not make all routes more accessible to everyone? I would answer that this attitude is just as egotistical—treating rock climbs more like commodities for mass consumption than opportunities for different experiences. "Just skip the bolts if you want the risk," goes the classic retort, which is absurd to anyone who understands what it takes to tap into true commitment and self-reliance. It's when the options for retreat are more limited that we discover how well we know ourselves and our capabilities. It is a tango with ego, yes, but "dangerous" climbs are significantly less dangerous when you're prepared for them and approach them with patience and humility—traits that increasingly seem to be lacking in today's "Send it!" culture.

While it only takes a brief lapse in judgment to impact loved ones by ending up in the hospital or the grave, it also only takes a few mavericks with power drills and relatively little knowledge to significantly alter routes, even entire crags, for all those who come after. I'm not saying that we should never change old routes, only that I wish for people to pause and reflect more before taking aggressive actions that affect so many others.

I was saddened to learn that Lighthouse Tower near Moab, Utah, recently suffered such blows. The tower's most popular route features three quality pitches up to 5.10 to gain a slabby ledge below the final short, slender pinnacle. From here you can enjoy a nearly 360-degree view above the Colorado River before rappelling down. If you wish to stand atop the nipple of the true summit fifteen feet higher, there are no anchors on top, so you must commit to down climbing a 5.9 mantel move that is mostly unprotected. In 1970, Harvey Carter, Gary Ziegler and Tom Merrill became the first people to stand on



that finger of stone after throwing a rope over the block and prusiking up the other side. I vividly remember climbing it in 2001 when I was eighteen: the dizzying vertigo I felt as I made mental notes of where the footholds were, knowing they'd be trickier to find when I reversed the moves. Apparently sometime this past season, bolts and chains were added to the summit, making it more accessible for the increasing number of climbers who are coming to the tower with less experience (and perhaps more entitlement to stand on the tippy-top). Someone complained about the development online and soon after that the bolts were chopped, leaving ugly scars—ripple effects of dueling egos, a sign of the times.

As we face deepening rifts in what people want for climbing, we are facing similar rifts in America. The culture war is widespread.

Donald Trump has just been reelected. His administration is known for aggressively prioritizing industry, profit and deregulation, with the environment being treated more like a commodity to be exploited. The outdoor industry continues to oppose many of Trump's efforts. But the outdoor industry itself inadvertently threatens to commodify the places we love, such as promoting activities like

climbing in the name of "growing the sport." We cite the benefits of making these experiences more accessible; we quantify the profits and participants to illustrate the powerful demand and how else these lands can be utilized for the economy.

Meanwhile, now that climbing is in the Olympics and has been shown to provide viable career opportunities, more and more people are entering the "sport" with a different focus and philosophy. What they are seeking on the rocks and mountains is changing.

As editor of this magazine, I am a cog in this industry. I see it as my job to remind us of our history, our original values and inspirations—the less tangible aspects of this activity that we love—and what stands to be lost if we allow ourselves to be swept up in the modern rabid thirst for more: more difficulty, more vertical feet, more attention, more likes on social media, more money, more clout, more marketing power. More easy pleasure. There is always more to be had, until there isn't.

It is my hope that we may learn from the Indigenous peoples who stewarded these lands for so long before settlers arrived and violently expelled them in the name of God, country and industry. Perhaps, before all that

is precious is gone, we will learn to step back from our mindless consumerism and our needy impulse to categorize things as black or white, and instead embrace the grey fog where life unfolds. To do that, each of us must regularly take the time to learn and understand ourselves and how we are connected to everything around us.

That's the beauty of a committing route—it obliges us to pause for self-reflection. Take the time to learn a place; read its history; feel the friction of the rock on your skin, the exposure nipping at your heels as your clothing snaps in the wind; enjoy the sensation of being little more than a beige or neon dot moving over a skyline that is older than time, just another organism crawling around, part of the landscape. Forget any notion of glory, for few, if anyone, will ever know or care. Listen to your heart, beating with adrenaline tempered by calm breaths. Escape your ego for those fleeting seconds or minutes. That is where you'll discover the best gifts that climbing has to offer, which can't be quantified by any numbers—only the personal insights and glow of inner joy that you may bring home to loved ones, provided you come down safely from the high. ■

[Top Left] **Todd Skinner begins the upper crux of Strategic Defense (5.11c/d) on Morning Glory Spire in City of Rocks, Idaho, 1987. Dave Bingham established the route in 1986. "One of the first 'sport' routes at the City, with two distinct cruxes and a committing**

feel. Solid," Bingham writes in his guidebook to the area. Bill Hatcher ■ [Top Right] **A more recent view of the time-tested classic from the opposite direction. The Crack of Doom follows the skyline barely visible near the center of the photo. Jeremiah Watt**



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LETTERS

Blown Apart by War

IT WAS SOMETIME IN the early 2000s—my husband Andrey, Max Petrenko and I were sitting around the table in my tiny kitchen in Yekaterinburg, Russia. The table was the same as everyone's: a tight, sacred six-square-meter relic of Soviet poverty, where whispers and arguments alike felt at home. Kitchens were where friends met, where freedom lived, however modest.

I don't remember exactly why Max came by that night. As Andrey and I sat with him, I launched into an old story, one of those tales from the lean Soviet years when I'd briefly known what it felt like to be "rich."

Back then, I was a promising climber drafted into the Army Sports Club, the coveted path for an athlete: full-time training with a stable income, food rations and airplane tickets. When the Soviet Union crumbled and the club disbanded, I got my payout in cash. They literally handed me a bulging backpack filled with rubles, which I carried through the small town, where most folks were heavy drinkers. As a kid with a bag full of cash, I was a target. When I finally got to Yekaterinburg's bus station, my first stop was at an exchange booth to trade the rubles for dollars, making my load a lot lighter. The next day, the ruble was devalued 1,000:1, wiping out most people's savings. But there I was, with a few thousand dollars in my little backpack, feeling like a savvy entrepreneur. As I added more colorful details about the scenes in that small garrison and how scared I'd been, Max and Andrey burst out laughing.

Then Max looked up and said, "My grandmother lives in that town. I spent a lot of time there as a kid, and I'm actually going back to visit her in a couple of days." That's how I found out Max had roots in the Ural Mountains. Max was born in Luhansk, while my aunt on my mother's side had married a Ukrainian and moved there.

Later, we took a trip to Crimea together. I was the editor-in-chief of Mountain.RU and a fairly well-known photographer. At that time, no one in the former USSR climbed better than Max. His technique was mesmerizing; he made refined, precise, graceful movements

look effortless. Max lived for climbing; nothing else seemed to matter much to him. He was a bit odd, an incredibly kind, gentle soul who took things at face value. He'd burst out laughing only after a joke was explained to him.

During that trip, on the cliffs near Yalta, a familiar sight greeted us—Ukraine's national climbing coach, Margarita Panferova, with her little boy, Danya. Margarita had waited a long time for Danya; her healthy, bright-eyed boy had finally arrived. He was an awkward, sweet kid with thick glasses that magnified his eyes and made him look like a curious little lemur. Whenever we climbed there, Danya would be darting around the rocks as Margarita coached. His father, Andrei Vedenmeer, a world champion speed climber, would sometimes join us, too, and it wasn't long before Danya took his own first steps on the rock.

By the time Crimea was annexed by Russia, Margarita could no longer coach Ukraine's national team, so she became a coach for Crimea. Soon, she brought Danya to his first Russian national championship. He was now an eighteen-year-old who had clearly inherited his father's strength and poise. After that, our paths drifted apart. Danya returned to Crimea, and the next thing I knew, war had erupted. News reached me that Danya had been drafted by Russia to fight on the front lines.

This past year, Max often called and messaged me. Life had become tough for him; he frequently stayed in hostels, sometimes going genuinely hungry. He asked everyone for money, always with a new reason, saying he needed it for parking, or else the Ukrainian military patrol would trace him and send him to the front lines. He was terrified of being sent to war. He said he wanted to go back to Luhansk, where he still had an apartment, at least somewhere to live. But Luhansk was now under Russian influence.

In July, he called me for the last time. To be honest, I sighed with relief when he



[Left] **Danya Vedenmeer, twenty-six, was killed fighting for Russia.** [Right] **Max Petrenko, forty-six, was killed fighting for Ukraine.** Anna Piunova (both)

stopped calling, thinking maybe he'd found some stability. Then on October 17, a message came through: Max had been killed by mortar fire while fighting for Ukraine. The explosion had been so devastating that his body couldn't be identified. He was buried in Kharkiv on October 24.

Danya Vedenmeer was killed in February 2024. Hypothetically, it could have been Max who killed him if he'd been drafted earlier. Or maybe Danya could have killed Max if he'd survived until October. Just yesterday, we were climbing together, traveling to competitions; today, we're forced into a war where we're killing each other.

Neither Max nor Danya ever wanted to kill, ever wanted to die, but these governments forced them to kill, and they were killed in turn. For what did they die?

I've faced hate from both sides—Ukrainian and Russian—because it's "not allowed" to feel compassion for Russian soldiers, young men. They're seen as killers by default. But I can't see people like Danya (or Max) that way. I know they would never have picked up a weapon unless they were forced by their countries. Yet, this perspective is unpopular and sparks a lot of criticism from both sides. I feel like we have to remain human. We have to acknowledge that both sides are suffering in this war. One of my Ukrainian friends told me they're being destroyed physically, but I feel like we're being destroyed morally. We're being forced back, morally and intellectually, into repressive times when people sat in their kitchens and feared saying a few words aloud.

—Anna Piunova, Chamonix, France

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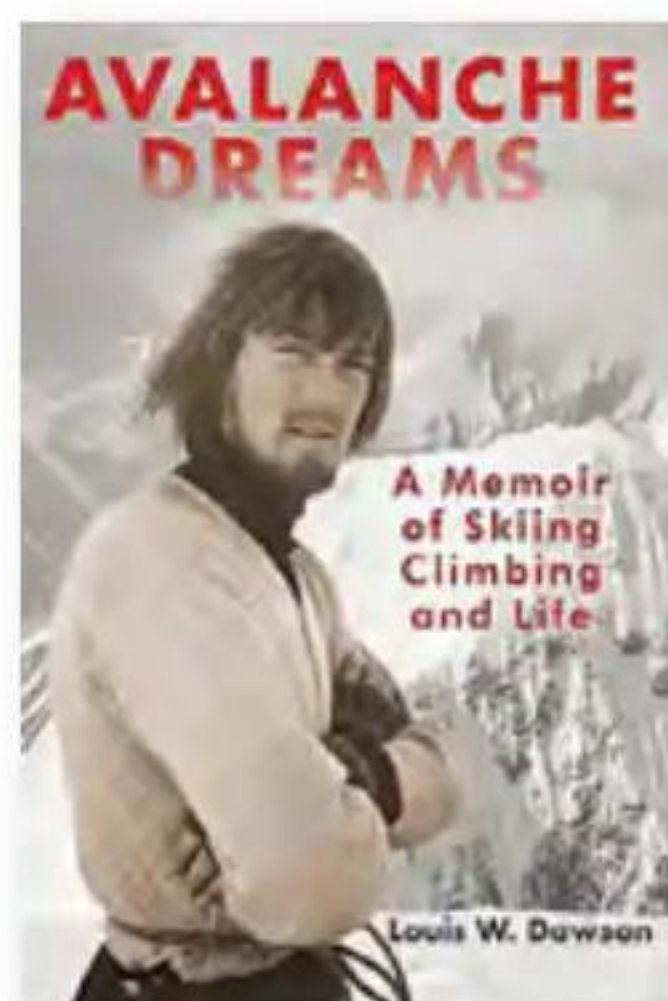


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Avalanche Dreams: A Memoir of Skiing, Climbing, and Life

Louis W. Dawson

LOUIS “LOU” DAWSON’S ski-mountaineering guidebooks and other writings have influenced generations of mountaineers, and the years of practice in his craft are evident in the polished storytelling of his new memoir. He’s most recognized as the first person to ski all of Colorado’s 14,000-foot peaks, which he completed in 1991. But his climbing career is also worthy of recognition, with a list of partners that includes Harvey Carter, Michael Kennedy and Ray Jardine.

What makes Dawson’s new book particularly worthwhile are not just the entertaining stories of (sometimes foolish) derring-do, but the way in which he reflects on his life with an honesty that is both compassionate and blunt. Now the father of a grown son, Dawson seems to have written this book especially for those possessed by the wild spirits of youth.

He considers the effects of growing up in Aspen, Colorado, during the 1960s when the hippie counterculture was at its peak, and with a father who was mostly absent. Dawson’s father, Charles, is the foil of the book as Dawson struggles to gain perspective on the broken pieces of his childhood. During World War II, Charles deserted the 10th Mountain Division while stationed at Camp Hale, Colorado. He spent 566 days in jail and the family subsequently lived under a shroud of secret shame. Charles introduced his four sons to the mountains. But as they entered their teens he also taught and encouraged them to use drugs under the guise of expanding their minds. In turn, Dawson became a heedless risk-taker, surviving his twenties only by the thinnest margins of luck. As the years ticked by, he wrestled with inner demons while trying to understand his motivations and choices. This book shares the wisdom he found.

—Derek Franz



Tobin, the Stonemasters, and Me, 1970–1980: Remembering Tobin Sorenson, the Best Climber in the World

Rick Accomazzo

TALES ABOUT THE STONEMASTERS—most often narrated by John Long—have had a huge influence on American climbing. The Stonemasters were a group of California climbers who shook up the Yosemite scene during the 1970s. One of Long’s high school friends, Rick Accomazzo, was among the group’s original members, followed shortly by Tobin Sorenson. Since our perspective of this pivotal time has been heavily colored by Long, it’s nice to get Accomazzo’s view, along with some fresh stories as well.

The book is organized around Sorenson’s life, though I would not call it a biography. It is more like a memoir centered around the thread of Sorenson’s climbing career. The stories are entertaining, though perhaps less accessible to non-climbers, and Accomazzo succeeds in making the case that Sorenson was likely the most well-rounded climber in the world before he died while attempting the second ascent of Mt. Alberta’s north face, solo, in 1980.

Among the most intriguing details we get to see from Sorenson’s life are personal letters. The last note he sent to his fiancée before setting off on Mt. Alberta includes a revealing statement: “I’m really not sure if I will be alive in a few days.”

In his foreword to the book, Long writes: “A Stonemaster ... could only be a kid with a restless spirit and unrequited dreams. And the champion of those dreams, right into the next world, was always Tobin Sorenson.” This sets up the real conflict of Accomazzo’s story: surviving the willful ambition of youth. “Back then I was a different person, almost unrecognizable to me now, and engaging in an objective cost/benefit analysis was the furthest thing from the minds of Tobin Sorenson and the Stonemasters,” Accomazzo writes.

—Derek Franz



Mountains before Mountaineering: The Call of the Peaks before the Modern Age

Dawn Hollis

FOR DECADES, writers have quoted seventeenth-century depictions of mountains as “warts,” insisting that almost no one perceived the beauty of the Alps—let alone enjoyed climbing them—until the arrival of Romantics and British tourists.

“This is a compelling vision,” Dawn Hollis acknowledges in her groundbreaking book. “It is fascinatingly strange” to picture an age when people thought peaks were blots on the earth, and “deliciously tempting” for modern climbers to believe a “special relationship with mountains” was inconceivable before the eighteenth century. But this vision is also, as her research proves, “*wrong*.”

With vivid prose, Hollis recalls earlier artists who painted luminous towers, bluish with distance and desire; adventurers who sought challenges and marvels; naturalists who delighted in alpine flowers; pilgrims who climbed to feel closer to heaven; scholars who defended peaks as God’s ornaments; and villagers who developed glacier travel techniques, scaled cliffs in search of chamois and gathered snow for ice-cream makers.

To be a *mountaineer*, Hollis reminds us, once meant to dwell among mountains—until Victorians narrowed the word’s significance to privileged visitors like themselves who pursued climbing as an exclusive sporting activity. In today’s climate crisis, we’d do well to follow Hollis’s advice: rather than perpetuate a myth that “real” love and knowledge of peaks could only be cultivated by modern elites, we should look to varied groups of mountaineers with more harmonious and sustainable approaches—those who’ve appreciated the whole of an alpine environment, not merely its most coveted summits.

—Katie Ives

Nina Williams was inducted as the new board president of the American Alpine Club (AAC) this past April, following outgoing president Graham Zimmerman. She is the third woman to chair the board after Deanne Buck (2019–2020) and Alison Osius (1998–1999). At thirty-four years old, Williams is also likely the youngest person to hold the office and has served on the board since 2021. She started her career as a competition climber while growing up in New England. DEREK FRANZ

NOW BASED IN BOULDER, Colorado, Williams has made a name for herself in highball bouldering and free soloing—high-consequence disciplines where endurance, consistency and mind control are paramount. Some of those ascents have been featured in Reel Rock films.

You might be the first “boulderer” to become president of the American Alpine Club?

I think I am the first boulderer! It’s a reflection of the AAC’s more inclusive direction and one that I am proud of.

What are your primary responsibilities as president?

I keep the board informed and engaged with the organization so that directors can keep a high-level perspective on the AAC’s future and make sure decisions are in line with our strategic plan. I see myself as a conduit between the board and the organization, creating a space for honest dialogue that helps push the AAC forward.

Can you describe the path that led you to this office?

I’ve led a somewhat nontraditional life by dropping out of college to pursue climbing. But early on, my team coach told me that in terms of a career, climbing was just a way to get my foot in the door. The real career is about how I’m giving back to the community. That advice motivated me to pay my climbing forward by teaching others what I was learning along the way. I participated in community events, hosted clinics and coached climbers. I opened up about doubt and uncertainty. In sharing these experiences, I wanted

to help define professional climbing differently: that the stories of climbing can be a reflection of life and the person living it, so much more than just grades and linear progression. My career evolved toward an interest in social dynamics and interpersonal communication. I eventually went back to college and finished my degree in 2021.

How would you describe the direction of the club from its beginnings to now?

The AAC was founded in 1902, initially based in scientific exploration, the cultivation of mountain craft and the study of high mountain elevation. Nearly 125 years later we remain focused on these initiatives, as demonstrated in our mission statement: “Provide climbers with resources that advance knowledge, inspiration, and advocacy.” Our core principles haven’t changed as we continue supporting climbers through our rescue benefits, grants program, lodging facilities, advocacy work and annual publications such as *The American Alpine Journal* and *Accidents in North American Climbing*.

Have the club’s priorities shifted over time?

While our direction remains in line with our founding principles, I believe our priorities have shifted to support the climber more as a person, in addition to climbing as simply activity/achievement. We have historically provided resources that support the climbing journey and experience. Over the years, we’ve identified ways to expand those resources that better support the growing climbing demographic. The definition of what it means to be



a climber is growing every day, and the AAC is uniquely suited to bring together communities across the country in pursuit of strong connections and healthy landscapes.

How did you start climbing?

I started when I was twelve; first at an outdoor wall in New Hampshire and then on a competitive team in my home state of Rhode Island. Along with the unique movement and puzzle-solving, I enjoyed the mental tension of feeling scared but knowing that I was still safe.

How did your climbing pursuits evolve over the years?

I was primarily an outdoor/competitive boulderer until age twenty-seven. I’d always been attracted to highballs. I’d climb buildings around Providence and taller lines on rock in Pawtuckaway and Rumney. My prominent highball bouldering started in my mid-twenties (Speed of Life, V10; Footprints, V9 X; Evilution Direct, V11; Ambrosia, V11 X), as well as dabbling in longer trad climbs. I’ve gotten into selective free soloing now in my thirties. Achieving consistency in performance is one of my most satisfying milestones; I feel confident in climbing something challenging and beautiful wherever I go. Chasing linear progression for progression’s sake stopped filling my cup. It ties into another pivotal moment of realizing that I didn’t want

[Photo] **Nina Williams on China Beach (5.14b) in Rumney, New Hampshire. The power-endurance testpiece was first climbed by Dave Graham in 1999. Williams achieved the first female ascent in May 2023.** Jordi Llauredó

to do the same thing forever. I want to try new things, learn and grow into a person who can give back to a community that has given me so much already. When I was twenty-eight I went back to college and finished my undergrad while continuing to climb professionally.

Tell me more about those studies ...

I graduated from the University of Colorado at Boulder with a degree in communication and leadership studies and continued my education with a certificate in the Process Communication Model (PCM), alongside my coaching certification through the International Coaching Federation (ICF). I've always been a social person, and after encountering different communities across the globe I became more interested in how people speak and understand each other on an interpersonal level. There are a lot of dynamic nuances within conversation that extend beyond the moment of speech

itself. I'm applying those lessons most heavily within my board position at the AAC and my role as a professional athlete.

On your podcast, Bad Kitty, and elsewhere, you've been open and vulnerable about your personal life. How do you find the balance between stoic professionalism and oversharing?

In being open about my past, I hope to combine the definitions of leadership, professionalism, vulnerability and relatability so that they are all inextricably intertwined. It's certainly a learning process, but I'd rather expose a part of myself and grow from owning it than hide and restrict that potential growth. Discomfort is often the most interesting part of life. I'm fine talking about my own discomfort so that others may feel empowered to talk about theirs.

What are three climbing accomplishments you're most proud of and what styles do you excel at?

Too Big to Flail (V10 X) in Bishop, California; China Beach (5.14b) in Rumney, New Hampshire; and soloing the Longs Peak Triathlon

in Colorado (biking thirty-eight miles from Boulder, hiking about six miles, ascending the Diamond via the Casual Route, IV 5.10a, to reach the 14,255-foot summit of Longs, descending and biking home).

What life lessons have you applied to climbing, and what climbing lessons have you applied to life?

I'm most proud of developing an intuition around what I want or don't want, which has helped create a fulfilling life. When I'm not sure what I want, I focus on what I don't want. I pay attention to how my body feels when I'm engaging in certain work or activities. I'm accepting of change. I'm not always right and I don't always listen to myself but I've learned to build confidence by remaining curious about sensations and trusting my process. I've learned to accept myself at whatever moment I find myself in, whether that's being lost during a free solo or unsure of what a word means in the middle of a board meeting. I understand that each lesson may need to be learned again at some point, and I appreciate the present moment as it unfolds.

Odds & Ends

Porter Hangers. The sandstone cliffs of the Red River Gorge have enticed climbers in northeastern Kentucky since at least the 1960s. Back then, a small number of people were establishing trad routes by pounding pitons, and later, by placing less impactful gear like chocks, nuts and eventually Friends. As gear evolved, so did the availability of routes in the Red. But it wasn't until the 1990s that the gorge began to transition into the beloved sport climbing destination that it is today. When Porter Jarrard arrived in 1990, he brought with him a talent for climbing, a knack for route development—honed in West Virginia's New

River Gorge and elsewhere—and self-made bolt hangers that became synonymous with his climbs. Jarrard established a base camp near Miguel's Pizza, which had opened a few years earlier. After famously leaving a note in the visitor's log there expressing his interest in bolting routes, he began using his hangers—sometimes made from one-eighth-inch angle iron or old bed frames—to make climbing possible on the steep faces and dramatic overhangs of the gorge. Many of his early routes, including Stay the Hand (5.12a), Fuzzy Undercling (5.11b) and Reliquary (5.12b), which Porter established alongside partners, are still popular among climbers in the Red today, though the original hangers Jarrard used have long since been replaced. ABBEY COLLINS



Photo: Billy Simek

On Sight



Michael Gardner died on October 7, 2024, while attempting the unclimbed north face of Jannu East (7460m) in Nepal with his good friend Sam Hennessey. “All the beauty that I find in the mountains is constantly shifting,” Gardner wrote in *Alpinist* 77. Drew Smith

Jackson Marvell hops on a curtain of ice while hiking back from HMR (WI5), above Lake Superior on Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. “If you can climb Michigan ice, you can climb anywhere in the country,” Bill Thompson with Michigan Ice Fest told *Climbing* in 2019. Austin Schmitz



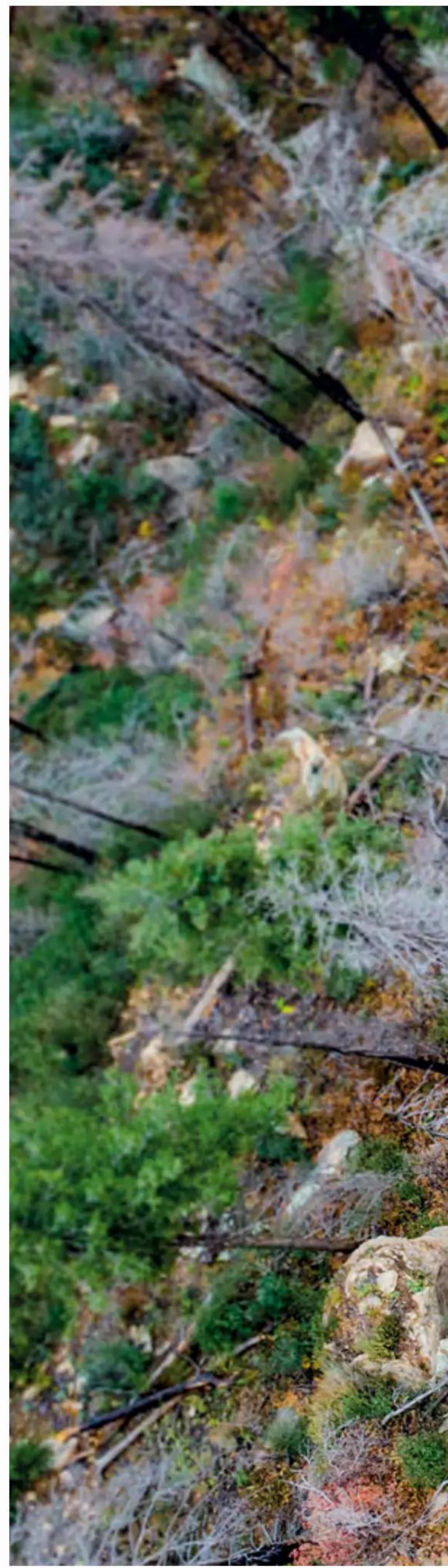




A climber sets off on the sharp end on Supertrek. The route is a variation of Chiaro di Luna (5.11a) on the west face of the Patagonian tower Aguja Saint-Exupéry (ca. 2550m). Chiaro di Luna earned its name when the first ascensionists descended under the light of the moon in 1987. Matt Van Biene



Fiona Layton in the Harding Slot on Astroman (5.11c). John Bachar, John Long and Ron Kauk completed the first free ascent of the 1,000-foot route on the east face of Washington Column in Yosemite in 1975. Warren Harding, Glen Denny and Chuck Pratt established the aid route in 1959. Alexa Flower





Manoah Ainuu nears the top of a steep pillar of ice on Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Ainuu gave advice to new climbers in an interview with **Montana Mountaineering in 2021**: "Always be safe, but just don't take it too seriously. Prioritize fun and having a good time." Austin Schmitz

Alyse Dietel works her way up the second pitch of Heart and Soul (5.11+) in Arizona's Oak Creek Canyon. Dietel is also an artist, whose dreamy drawings and paintings are inspired by nature. She leaned further into her craft after suffering serious injuries in a hiking accident in 2012. Blake McCord



A high-altitude mountain landscape. In the foreground, there are large, dark, jagged rocks partially covered in snow. The middle ground shows a steep, snow-covered slope leading up to a more prominent, snow-capped peak. The background features a vast, hazy mountain range under a clear sky. The overall scene is one of a remote, high-altitude environment.

ON BELAY

A Tale of Two Beasts | Ven Popov

Ulla's feet pressed against the snow-covered rock walls of what we came to call the Hero Dihedral on the south ridge of La-sum (6045m)—an unclimbed, three-pronged peak hidden in the remote Changla Himal region of western Nepal. “We made a mistake leaving the rope and gear behind,” she said as she climbed up to my stance.

My eyes drifted from Ulla's head below me out to the deep blue of the sky around us. *So, it's true*, I thought. *The sky really can be this color at altitude*. Jagged lines separated the blue canvas from the white-capped tops of the other Changla Himal peaks surrounding us. Crisscrossing streaks of overhanging seracs, deep-cut snow gullies and glaciated ice ramps brought my eyes down to two tiny colorful dots at the valley floor. We had spent the last couple of days in our tents down there with our friends Manuel Bonnet and Yoann

Trellu, waiting for the mountains to calm down, admiring the thundering avalanches. Today, however, all was quiet. Except for the panic rising in my throat.

After Ulla joined me, I continued into the next section. “Ugh ... you might be right. Fuck! I'm stuck!” I cursed a couple of meters above her, my voice trembling. “I can't reverse this move.”

I looked down at what we had just climbed, and a tinge of fear colored my mind. *Damn it. Why am I doing this?*

Such moments often stamp a question mark on one's sanity. The terrain below was easy, but the staircase of rock and snow had turned into a ladder that faded into a slab. I tried to slot my only ice tool in a crack, but the secure placement I hoped for never came. What we thought might be a trivial acclimatization ridge scramble was proving to be a technical 5a (5.8) climb in subfreezing temperatures at nearly 6000 meters. I had long dreamt of a true adventure, and now when it had finally arrived in my life, all I could think was, *Is this worth it?*

This was neither the first nor the last time I asked myself the timeless question that many mountaineers struggle with.

THE BEGINNING OF THIS 2022 EXPEDITION was marked by a bout with Covid. I suffered the effects in my tent at base camp and would sometimes wake feeling like I was drowning. While listening to the howling winds and admiring the snowstorms brewing around us, I spent a long time reflecting on two questions that stubbornly refused to leave me alone: *What motivates me to climb? And if I don't recover enough from the sickness, will I be at peace with what many would consider a failed five-week expedition?*

The words of Jon Krakauer in *Eiger Dreams*, describing what he and Mark Twight wanted to achieve on their 1984 attempt on the Eiger Nordwand, often came to my mind: "One of the differences between us was that Marc [*sic*] wanted very badly to climb the Eiger, while I wanted very badly only to have climbed the Eiger." Quotes such as these tend to take on a life of their own, and while I cannot be quite sure what meaning Krakauer imbued these words with, they resonated with the two beasts within my soul that have throughout my life vied for control of my own dreams.

The first beast has always been the quiet one. It craves solitude and urges me to pursue a life that will bring me private joy, unsullied by thoughts of what others might think of me. It wants to simply climb—to embrace this experience for its own sake, like reuniting with a long-lost friend; an experience that would be just as dear and as precious even if there was no one to whom I could boast about it. Back when I was still on social media—I quit a year before the expedition took place—this was the beast that furtively enjoyed any quiet moment it managed to steal away from my frequent posting- and scrolling-induced daze.

But the second beast, much louder and more aggressive, has often won over. It craves attention and admiration; it will do anything to see the look of others when they hear of my latest, most daring excursion. It wants to *have* climbed. What matters is not so much the experience I might have, but what it will mean to have done it—how I will be perceived by my friends, colleagues and peers. This was the beast that, prior to my quitting social media, spent hours on every train ride back home from



the mountains curating photos and drafting profound-sounding bywords to post on Instagram. This was the beast that then waited eagerly for the likes and comments to feed its hunger for approval.

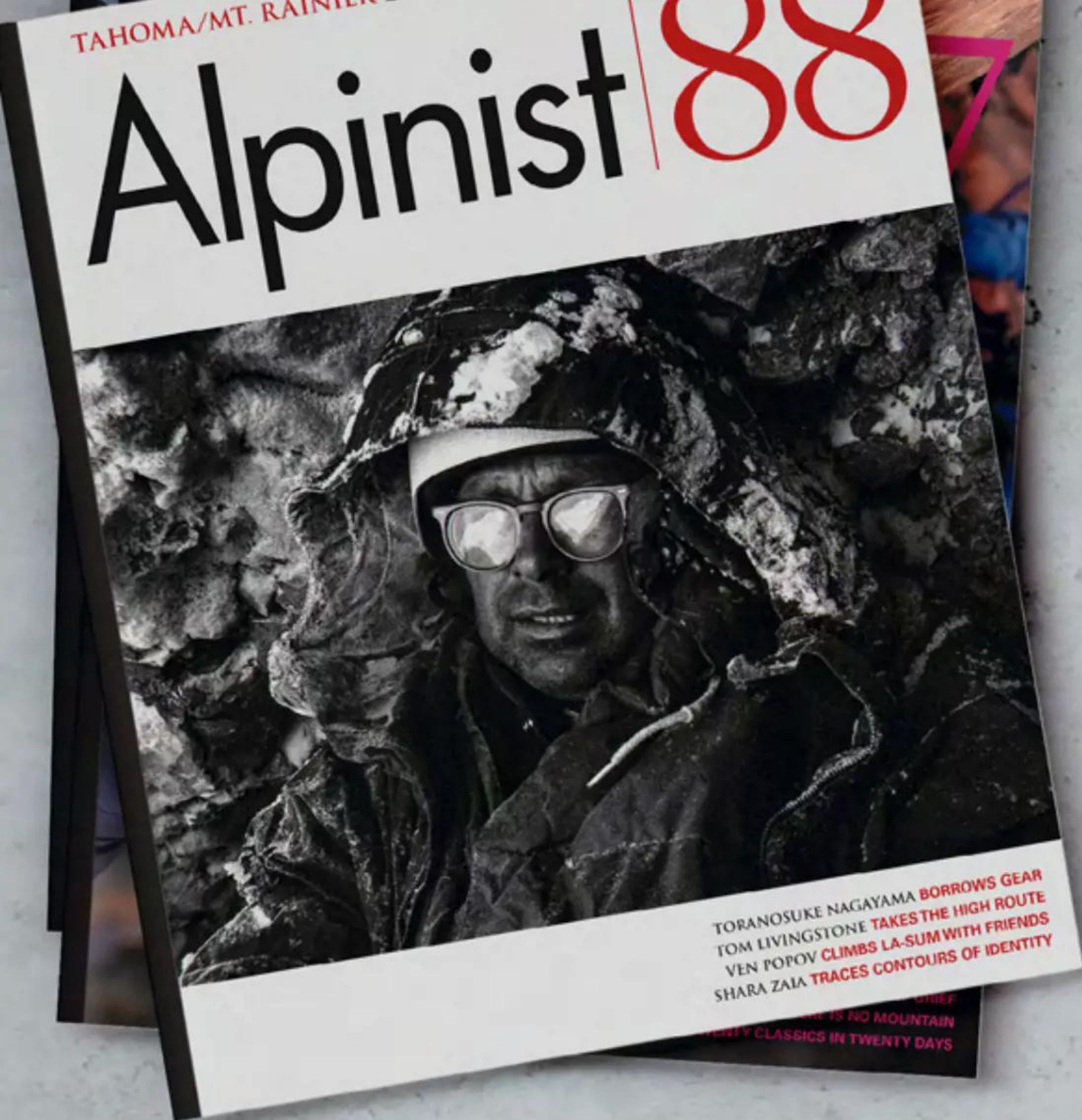
IN THE AUTUMN OF 2021, a year before our climb of La-sum took place, I was recovering from a heart-wrenching breakup. Besides that, I'd just moved from one continent to another for the second time in my life and was feeling lonely. I craved more meaningful experiences. My usual escape strategy—giving in to the second beast and boasting on Facebook, Instagram and Strava about my latest mountain affair—was proving to be a poor substitute. I thought that quitting social media would bring me greater peace of mind, but if anything, it highlighted that something crucial was missing.

So, when I learned that the Academic Alpine Club of Zürich (AACZ), which I had been a part of for two years, was organizing a five-week-long expedition to Nepal to celebrate its 125th anniversary, I jumped at the opportunity.

On the scale of the Himalayan mountains, 6000-meter peaks like the ones we were headed to in the Changla Himal region don't capture much of the public imagination. There are of course gems like Gave Ding (6571m), the most recognizable feature of the region, which was first climbed by Paul Ramsden and Mick Fowler via the north face in 2015, earning them a Piolet d'Or. Ramsden and Fowler characterized their ascent as half Eiger Nordwand, half Peuterey Integrale—a fitting description for the steep rock face that rises from the valley floor some 1500 meters below the summit, morphing halfway up into a narrow snow ridge. But most other summits scarcely seem worth the effort it takes to get there.

The effort, however, was partly what made it worthwhile for us to go. I don't know if it was a masochistic desire to supplant the emotional pain with physical discomfort, or merely the willingness to do anything to get out of Zürich

[Opening Spread] **Manuel Bonnet and Yoann Trellu approach the top of what the team later named the Hero Dihedral. Ven Popov and Ulla had run into trouble while leading this section.** | [This Page] **Ulla, Bonnet and Trellu relax in the sun at camp.** Ven Popov (both)



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The unnamed mountain won over, if only because we felt like we had unfinished business, and the mind rarely tolerates such nonsense.

and my daily life, but the more I learned about the logistical challenges of the expedition, the more motivated I became. The two days of international flights amid a global pandemic; the sixteen hours trapped in a van jolting across 500 kilometers of desolate, pothole-ridden roads connecting Kathmandu with Nepalgunj; the tiny propeller plane that might or might not fly at the desired time and date to take us to Simikot, where we'd start hiking at 2910 meters; the four days of trekking with eighteen other expedition members, several Nepali cooks and as many mules, just to get to base camp at the foot of Gave Ding; and best of all, the complete monthlong internet blackout. For some of my companions these were necessary evils; for me, they were half of the appeal.

And those were merely the challenges we foresaw. Other setbacks reared their ugly heads at regular intervals after we arrived in Kathmandu in late September 2022. A government official threatening to cancel our permits unless we bribed him? Check. A third of our preordered food supplies missing on arrival in Kathmandu? Check. Finding out that the 100 gas canisters we had ordered to await us in Nepalgunj never made it there? Check. Half of us falling sick with Covid on the trail despite precautions? Check. Our mule drivers stopping five kilometers short of, and 500

meters lower than, our intended base camp at the foot of Gave Ding? Check. A five-day snowstorm right after we came to terms with our new base camp location, causing us to reevaluate all climbing plans? Check. I'd wished for trouble and trouble repeatedly found us.

NEARLY A WEEK AFTER we set up base camp, the weather finally improved. Our spirits, however, were lagging. Assured that snowfall is but a rare occurrence during the post-monsoon season in the Himalaya, none of us had brought snowshoes or skis, a decision we imminently regretted. More than one meter of new snow fell during the first few days of the expedition. It would have been a feast for the eyes had it not forced us to painstakingly break a fresh trail to any potential objective. The original plan to split into half a dozen small teams, each tackling multiple different objectives and returning to base camp in between, was out of the question.

Our base camp sat at the intersection of two valleys flanking Gave Ding on its north and south sides. The unexpected snow conditions and time constraints forced us to form two larger groups, each having to decide which of the two valleys to commit to. Ulla, Manu, Yoann and I craved a more solitary experience and decided to split from the group to explore the southern valley.

We fell into a rhythm breaking trail. It goes like this: You start leading. The sun ricochets from the unbroken white surface, making you sweat despite the elevation. Step, sink; step, sink; step, sink. No sound but the crunching of the snow. After ten minutes even this sound disappears for a moment, when you move to the back of the line to rest briefly. Repeat three more times until it's your turn to lead again.

[Photo] La-sum, as seen by drone from the east before a storm blanketed the mountains in fresh snow. The four climbers followed the wide gully to the left of the peak before climbing the south ridge to the summit. Andreas Frank



Time dragged on. We lived in ten-minute days and forty-minute weeks. In real time, we spent five days shuttling to and from base camp to establish a gear depot and eventually two new advance camps. Our final camp at 5300 meters—ten kilometers away and 900 meters higher than base camp—lay in the basin directly south of Gave Ding, which we hoped to climb via a new route.

But first, we wanted to warm up and acclimatize on an unnamed nearby mountain with a rocky south ridge that we could approach from the same spot. Our first attempt to climb it failed—the full ridge proved to be incredibly long, requiring multiple rappels over several towers. We gave up halfway through and escaped back to camp.

Mountains have a way of ruining even the best-laid plans and it became clear that we needed to make a difficult choice. With the time we had left it was simply not possible to attempt both peaks. Gave Ding or an as-yet unnamed summit? The unnamed mountain won over, if only because we felt like we had unfinished business, and the mind rarely tolerates such nonsense.

On our second attempt we set out with another strategy, ascending a long, moderately steep east-facing couloir that cut the south ridge in half. Despite more than a week of sunny days and clear, cold nights, the snow had not

consolidated well. Every step we took up the fifty-degree slope punched through a thick ice crust into soft and unstable powder. We needed nearly three hours to ascend just 500 meters to an opening in the main ridge. We named this the *Frühstücksplatz* (breakfast place)—a spot offering a respite and a change of scenery; an opportunity to regroup and plan the next stage of the climb. A spot where Ulla and I, propelled by overconfidence and the deceptively easy-looking terrain ahead, decided to drop all climbing gear except for our harnesses.

“It looks easy,” we agreed. “Scrambling would be so much more pleasant without having to carry all of this on our backs.”

OUR PLAN HAD BEEN to climb in two teams of two, each pair sharing a rope and a small alpine rack. Not long after Ulla and I left our rest spot, we realized we’d made a mistake in leaving the gear behind. Thankfully, Manu and Yoann had more sense and had roped up behind us. As my calf started shaking, cramping from the uncomfortable stance, I saw them approaching and breathed a sigh of relief. Manu reached Ulla first, who then threw the sharp end of the rope up to me. A stack of Manu’s slings, cams and nuts, clipped to a knot in the rope, followed. I quickly slotted a secure nut and suddenly my whole body relaxed. I was safe. Now, with protection at hand, what had previously looked like a frightening set of moves up a snow-covered dihedral instead invited the kind of excitement dear to every climber performing near their limit.

After making a few straightforward moves and placing a couple of pieces of protection, I came to the crux: a slabby section of the dihedral. There were good footholds far apart and seemingly no handholds. A streak of snow split the slab in two, hinting that a crack might be hiding behind it. I cleaned the snow and to my relief discovered the would-be crack running across the slab—just wide enough for me to jam the pick of my ice tool. I took a deep breath, pulled on the tool and managed to get my feet slightly higher, stemming on each side of the dihedral. Unfortunately I only had one axe, so I had to give up my connection to the rock to gain a higher hold.

“Watch me!” I shouted.

My minor panic was unfounded, however. I had passed the test. With newfound confidence, I enjoyed the next few moves until the rope became taut.

Ulla’s head emerged between the rocks five bodylengths below. Until this point all four of us were planning to simul-climb, a technique that is efficient but questionable when the chance of a slip seems more likely. My better angels took control, and I started looking for a good belay spot. I saw a promising block perched above me and shouted down: “I need two more meters. Keep climbing, then I belay.” The block was loose. “Never mind, I need two more!”

As I topped out above the Hero Dihedral—which we mockingly named because two “heroes” tried to solo it and

[Photo] Popov makes his way up a steep snow gully on the morning the team reached the summit. They estimated the gully, which allowed the climbers to access the ridge to the summit, to be between forty and fifty degrees. Ulla

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had to be rescued by their friends—I felt exhilarated. *Hell yeah!* I thought. *That's what I came here to climb. What a pleasant surprise that our scramble proved to be the real deal.*

I belayed the other three up and to my surprise Ulla did not share my excitement.

“This is too difficult,” she said, frowning. “We are too slow, and we shouldn’t be climbing this.”

“Oh, come on,” I grumbled. “Isn’t this so much more fun than we expected?”

“If it remains this difficult, we should turn back. We’ll never be able to finish.”

I was confused because Ulla is a very capable and experienced climber. Certainly more experienced than I was. At the same time, I knew that her experiences had forged a kind of conservatism that I sometimes found too smothering. Maybe the problem was me—was I being too reckless? Weeks later, when I came back to Zürich, Tim Aiken, a close friend and the AACZ vice president, told me he was very glad my partner was Ulla. “I think there is a yin and yang aspect to you two, a balance in the partnership,” he said. “Ulla could probably as easily write something about you always pushing her further than she wants to go.”

Turning one’s own eye inward often reveals things unpleasant and unkind. And Tim had a point. A smarter me would have tried to understand what drove Ulla’s concerns, and not dismiss them out of hand. But the me that was there was in the thrall of summit fever and could see no farther than the next exciting step. Justifications abound in transfixed minds, and I thought that so long as we felt in control, there was no reason to give up quite yet. Was it the first beast, craving to know what it would feel like to stand at the summit? Or was it the second beast, with its desire for future admiration, that would not let me back out? Or was it simply that after weeks of drudgery and one problem after another, I was finally having fun? I am honestly not sure. In any case, we agreed to keep going.

“Nice lead,” said Manu with a sheepish grin. Now it was his turn to lead. All four of us looked up at the path ahead and then stared at each other. The incredulity on their faces—the furrowed brows, the doubting eyes, the tightening of sunburned lips—mirrored what I felt. Fifty meters above us rose a massive, steep shark-fin tower of beautiful fire-brick rock. “Is *that* the summit?” someone muttered. “We can’t climb that.”

A notch on the right of the tower gave us hope. “Let’s go up there and see if there is an easier way on the back of this monster.” I’m not sure who said it, but we all agreed, and Manu led us on a running rope through a series of exposed, loose snow ledges and a few technical rock steps

on the west side of the ridge.

When we arrived at the notch, we marveled at the imposing tower above us. The easiest route to its top appeared to be a ramp that turned vertical halfway up. Even though it was well featured, with plates separating horizontal cracks—something each of us would delight in climbing at a local crag—none of us felt ready to tackle it. Thankfully, a weakness through the rock at the notch let us bypass the tower on its east side.

Ulla’s conservatism crept up again, and she suggested that we should just turn back. It was getting late and she did not want to get stuck descending in the cold of night. It was a reasonable concern but none of the rest of us wanted to turn back just yet. We decided to set a turnaround time of 3 p.m., an hour from then. In retrospect, choosing when to turn back is something we should have done before we ever set foot on the mountain. At this point we couldn’t see how much of the ridge was left. Was it an hour away? Or five?

“I’d like to go,” Ulla said suddenly, four times in a row, while I was preparing to lead the next section. It took me an embarrassing amount of time to understand that instead of a frustrated plea to turn back, this was her way of saying she wanted to lead. Happy to share the excitement of leading, I started handing her the gear and the end of the rope. “I wasn’t against the summit attempt,” she said weeks later as we reflected on the experience. “I was skeptical, yes, but all too happy to be proven wrong.”

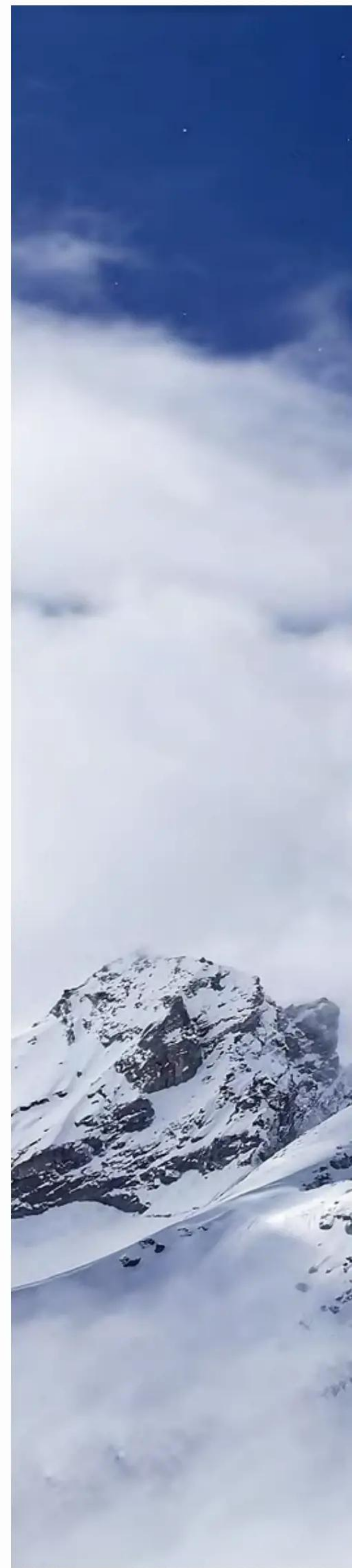
I tied in ten meters behind her, followed by Yoann and Manu, each ten meters apart as well. I followed Ulla as she led through the notch, then past the bone-shivering, exposed Shit Traverse—a proper name, we thought, for its loose mixture of sand, mud, melting snow and crumbling rock. The rock would not take any protection, and every step over the ten-meter traverse felt like an exercise in faith.

Thankfully, the traverse soon gave way to a solid but tricky boulder problem over slabby rock, the second technical section of the day. Shallow pockets in golden rock required a careful dance in which hands played only a supporting role. Ulla dispatched the boulder problem with grace and began kicking steps up the steep snow slope above. I don’t remember if she had managed to protect the slabby boulder problem, but I remember the horror I felt when, after I was already above it, I heard Yoann yell from behind us: “Take!”

Shit, he must be on the traverse, I thought, wondering if there was any gear below us.

Even if such a piece of protection had existed, at best it would have arrested a fall but would not have helped Yoann’s desire for security. If he had fallen, he would have pulled both me and Ulla from the snow slope above, and

Turning one’s own eye inward often reveals things unpleasant and unkind.





[Photo] **Ulla takes the lead at the base of a steep shark-fin tower. She then continued over a notch and onto the Shit Traverse—so named because of its horrendous climbing conditions.** Ven Popov

all three of us would have ended up hanging in the air on one cam, with Manu potentially belaying us from the notch. The loose snow wouldn't accept either an axe belay or a seated belay, so I screamed down, "NO! No belay! Two more meters!" That was the distance to the closest rock wall capable of taking protection. In all honesty, with the rope cutting through the snow and tensioning its way around the corner, we would have likely been able to hold a fall. Still, I wanted to leave no doubt in Yoann's mind that security was but a mirage.

We heard no further comments from below, although after spending weeks with Yoann I am certain that an obligatory "Oh, *putain* [fuck]!" must have followed. We inched our way up to the rock as the rope tension became almost unbearable. *Oh, putain indeed*, I thought. Ulla finally reached the rock, quickly plugged a cam in a small solid crack, assumed a good stance and yelled down, "On belay!" Soon enough we were all together again.

"What a wonderful pitch!" exclaimed Ulla, finally catching my excitement. I smiled. I also enjoy climbs much more on lead.

It was now 3 p.m., however, and we had to decide. The way up looked technical but superb—a narrow snow gully, flanked by steep rock walls, forming a corridor with two icy rock steps breaking the uniformity of the snow line. Rays of sunlight broke through the top of the gully, hinting that in some twenty to thirty meters we might reach the summit ridge proper. *But how long after that to the top?* It felt tantalizingly close.

At this elevation, upon sunset the temperature usually plummeted to -20°C , and we wanted to be done with all rappelling and technical down climbing before that happened. *Shivering at a rappel station in the dark is not fun business*, I thought, recalling a twenty-seven-hour Type-II-fun adventure on the North Face of the Aiguille Verte. After a brief discussion we sent Manu on a reconnaissance lead. Once he reached the sunbathed ridge, he was to decide whether to keep going or turn back.

Following him up the pleasant snow and ice gully, we soon lost sight of him when he turned a corner.

"There it is! The summit. Ten minutes!" Manu's joyous voice suddenly boomed. It was 3:30 p.m.

[Photo] **Ulla makes her way up the ridge shortly before she took over the lead.** Ven Popov



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NORRØNA 
Welcome to nature

“Let’s do it, keep going,” I roared, feeling the thrill bubbling inside.

A soft afternoon glow streamed down from the setting sun. The light spilled over the summit and down the snow ridge to my face, and then my hands and boots. It wrapped me in a blanket warmer than what I would have thought this meager sunset could provide. Easy but exposed snow gave way to a couple of boulder problems; the second one led us directly to the tiny summit platform.

As Ulla, the last on the rope five meters behind me, made it onto the summit boulder, a wave of excitement and gratitude flowed over us. We hugged each other, our smiles warmer than our bodies. No words were necessary. The relaxed faces of the others told their own story, one that I recognized within myself. All was well and in stunned silence we took in the sights around us; sights that no other human had ever laid eyes upon from this vantage.

We named the peak La-sum, which roughly translates to “the Three Peaks” or “the Three Passes” in the Tibetan language. We chose the name because we saw two other summits on the ridge ahead while we were perched on the summit boulder.

BEFORE LA-SUM, DURING QUIET moments of my life, whenever the excitement of a day stolen away in the mountains had waned, I often wondered if I had simply arrived on Earth too late. The age of exploration appeared to be over and what first ascents remained seemed to be reserved for the world’s top climbers, whose skill and fitness I could never hope to match. I resigned myself to far less lofty goals, happy to find some solitude and avoid the crowds, even if, ultimately, I was following someone else’s footsteps.

But in my heart, I’ve long felt the scarlet allure of the unknown. Glimmers of this feeling have snuck up on me on the otherwise well-trodden paths of my home mountains of Bulgaria; on oft-repeated summer climbing routes up striking granite pillars in Wyoming; on multi-day autumn trail runs across the lake-splattered valleys of Tessin; in the small joys of finding powder-snow couloirs in springtime Graubünden. Hiking, climbing and skiing have always felt exciting because the process of discovery is a personal one—no two people will ever share the same journey, despite following the same routes to the top or bottom. When you wake up in a mountain hut in summer, only to find that cold-loving Ullr, Norse god of winter, patron saint of skiers, has in his infinite wisdom decided to drop ten centimeters of fresh snow on your aspirations, suddenly the route that hundreds climb each year becomes a creature of a rarer nature.

Prior to the expedition I took solace in such thoughts, but I always knew that something was missing. The longing in my heart for a truly novel experience was always there, in the background, whispering that there is more to this life. But what?

I now finally understood. We had done the thing I’d



long thought to be inaccessible to weekend warriors like us. We had ventured into the unknown and returned not only with a first ascent, but with a much more intimate understanding of what it means to pursue such an adventure. To have met the mountain as equals—not conquering, but befriending it, answering the challenge it posed to us, facing plenty of doubts—provided an experience that made me question who I was and what I wanted my life to be.

As I write this, nearly two years have passed since our climb, and I am again reminded of the two beasts that have driven my actions for so long. Throughout my life I have often given in to the second beast and fallen into the trap of “wanting to have climbed” this or that. I’d grown tired of feeding that beast. Yet leading up to the expedition it was still gnashing away, starving for crumbs, clouding my vision. Something needed to change.

The ironies of fate would bear fruit: my sickness, the five-week-long internet detox and the many quiet moments trenching laboriously through the unexpected snow brought me not frustration, but a clear mind. One morning, after I had had to wake our expedition doctor in the middle of the night because I couldn’t breathe, I wrote the following in my journal, my hand shaking from exhaustion:

I need to accept the fact that I might not be able to climb anything at all. I should not despair—we all must work with the cards we are dealt. This is still an adventure, albeit not the one I bargained for—if there were no surprises, it would be no adventure at all. We accept the risks precisely because we seek the unfamiliar; when it doesn’t match our expectations, we are handed down a learning opportunity—to learn something about the world, about others and perhaps above all, about ourselves.

Standing on top of La-sum, I couldn’t help but hear what David Roberts eloquently described as “the siren song of the unknown.” At least for a short window of time, the second beast was dead, and in its ashes I found a clarity of purpose. ■

[Photo] After reaching the summit of La-sum, Bonnet belays Trellu as he makes the final moves to the top. Ven Popov

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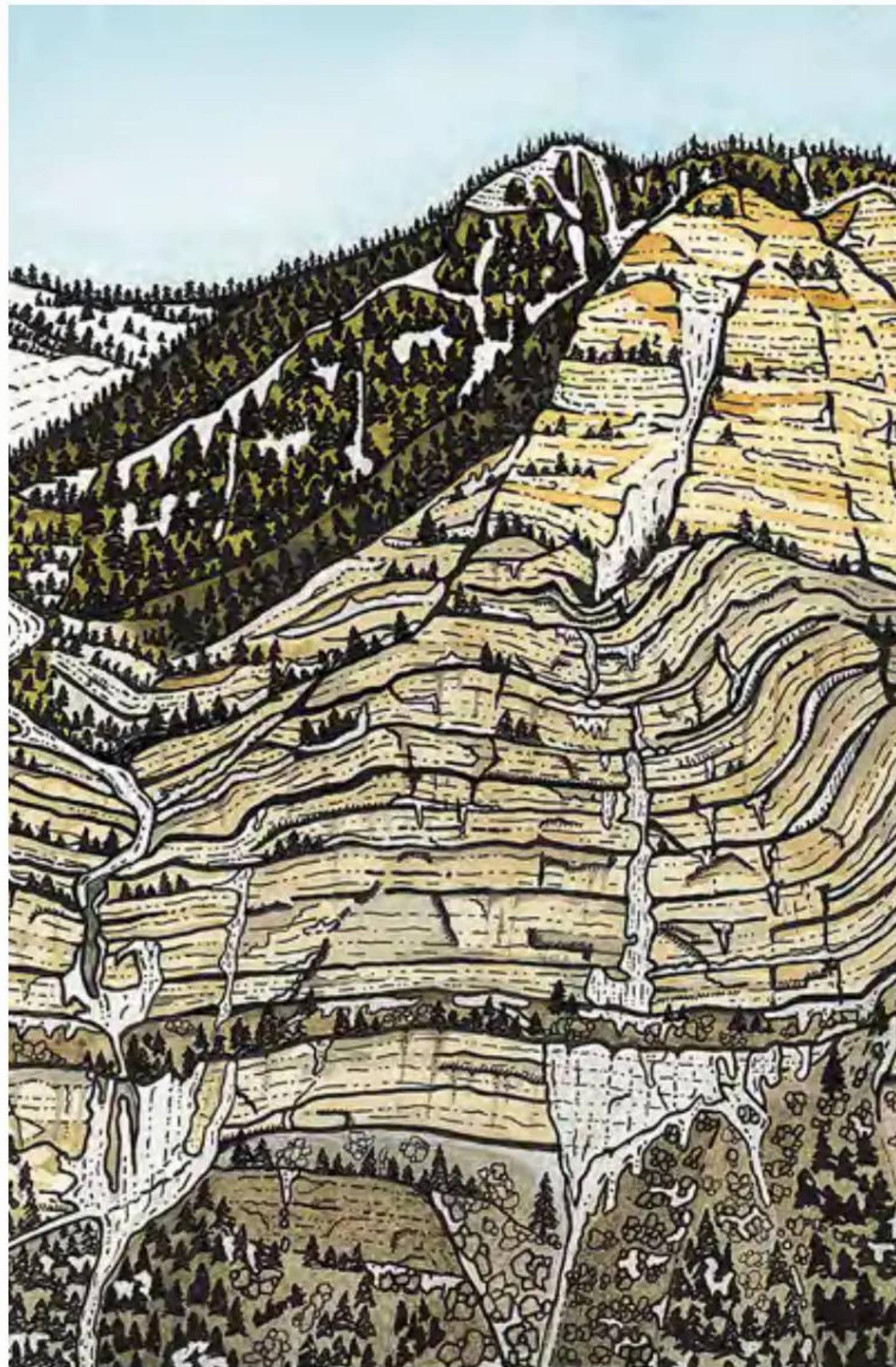
On Approaching

IN AN OBSCURE YOUTUBE video, the poet Robert Bly proposes a thought experiment: Each painting by Rembrandt has been hung in a different cabin in Colorado. The cabins are spaced thirty miles apart, linked by a primitive trail. To view the paintings, you must walk and walk and walk—and keep walking, and keep walking, blisters and mosquitoes and thunderstorms be damned—through rugged, seemingly endless backcountry.

Bly's getting at the significance of context, of a total experience, of preparing body and mind and soul to meaningfully encounter, to thoroughly engage, something powerful, important, rare. Imagine driving to a downtown museum; you wait in a crowded queue of antsy, phone-fiddling culture-vultures and smile at a grey-faced security guard who does not reciprocate, then finally catch a harried glimpse of, say, *Man in a Turban* (1632) or *The Night Watch* (1642) or *Self-Portrait with Two Circles* (ca. 1665). Alternatively, imagine hoofing it in the vast wild woods for three days, sleet chilling you to the bone; you eat energy bars for breakfast and dinner, see copious cougar scats and ferns galore and recall tender memories of camping as a child with your parents in New England. Following a close shave with a black bear, a closer shave with a moose, sixteen creek crossings and more energy bars, at last you come to a cabin in a meadow. A crooked door creaks open. A shaft of soft evening light falls on ...

In short, Bly's getting at a profound yet routinely overlooked and underloved aspect of adventuring: the approach.

I happen to live in Colorado, in a small town ringed by big peaks, so perhaps it's unsurprising that this whimsical thought experiment is regularly with me, particularly when I'm bushwhacking tangled basins and scrambling rotten gullies en route to the sharp, bright wonders of the alpine zone. Granted, I haven't stumbled on a cache of lost Rembrandts. But countless sudden, spine-tingling beauties, oddities and mysteries—moments of vivid



presence—have indeed cropped up in my path: a chipmunk's eyes after nine hours of slogging with my head down; a dozen shooting stars after a dreary week of clouds; a lone snowflake trembling on a spider's web after interminable cold; a pair of golden aspen leaves floating in the empty autumn sky after precisely 777 grueling switchbacks.

Would these have been stirring, startling, presence-rich moments—Rembrandts of a sort—if I hadn't "earned them" (as the rather annoying, sporty saying goes)? I doubt it. Physical exertion, exposure to the elements, silky quiet both outside and in, a temporary reprieve from the usual distractions of our fast-paced, on-demand existence—these can't be separated from the cherished *wow* in the *now*. They are part and parcel, integral. They are mandatory ingredients in the magic recipe, the special sauce.

Climbers, hikers and various other high-country devotees (myself included) often treat the approach as a means to the end of ... *what*? The thrilling technical pitches? The giddy vista? The ecstatic powder turns? The exceedingly Instagrammable photo op?

The sweet spot where we're allowed to drop our heavy packs, set up the tent, scarf cheesy noodles and relax? Certainly, the approach can be a scratchy, sweaty, ache-inducing, cuss-catalyzing march. And yes, the clean granite crux and the epic pillow line and the joy of peeling off crusty socks and dunking the old dogs in a cerulean tarn while sipping from the whiskey flask are ends worth pursuing. But denigrating the approach is to misunderstand the wholeness of what we're doing out there in the valleys and gorges, among the ancient conifers and the ephemeral flowers, on the glaciers and gleaming vertical walls.

When Göran Kropp chose to bicycle from Sweden to Nepal for a successful Everest bid in 1996, he was cultivating this wholeness, albeit in the extreme. The crag-obsessed blogger who repeatedly uses the phrase "boring-ass trail" is, alas, unwittingly flushing it down the toilet.

Let's celebrate the glorious layered complexity and fundamental necessity of approaching. It might sound like simple logic to claim that there can be no summit without an approach, but this is actually a deep philosophical truth, a resonant metaphor. *No summit without approach! No summit without approach!* Groveling in my local backyard mountain range, punky logs and shattered rocks rolling underfoot, buttresses soaring above, the destination to which I've attached my heart so near, so near, so near, and still so painfully far away, I try to keep this slogan, this mantra, front and center.

Bly again: "It's possible that the difficulty it takes you to arrive at a place where there's a work of art is connected to how well you absorb it." A nice idea to ponder, eh? But to be clear, I prefer Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (ca. 1665) over Rembrandt's paintings. And, ultimately, I prefer the jagged horizon itself over any famous Dutch masterpiece: Castleabra, White Benchmark, Precarious Peak, the Treasury Massif.

—Leath Tonino, *Crested Butte, Colorado*

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What Is Adventure?

"LIFE NEVER COMES TO closure, life is process, even mystery. Life is known only by those who have found a way to be comfortable with change and the unknown. Given the nature of life, there may be no security, but only adventure."—Rachel Naomi Remen, MD, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*

TALKEETNA, ALASKA, 1983: The long northern twilight illuminates the peaks of the Alaska Range as I take a seat at the bar of the Fairview Inn. I order a drink and try to ease myself back into civilization like a man might lower himself into a hot bath. For a month now I have lived on mountain time, a state of consciousness so removed from anything urban, it's a shock to find myself immersed once more in warmth and comfort.

My companions from the expedition are scattered. Evelyn was spirited away by helicopter into the sunset on Denali. Rick was left behind to brood on the mountain. Kelley is already jet-bound home to Utah.

Sitting alone in a corner of the bar, I do my best to drink a beer slowly. It's no use though. After a month of powdered drink mix, the alcohol comes alive on my tongue like heat lightning. The jukebox throbs out "Mr. Roboto" by Styx. As I sit nursing incandescent beer, fragments come back to me, one by one ...

WHILE FLYING FROM TALKEETNA to the landing strip on the Kahiltna Glacier, our pilot pointed out Foraker, the mountain the Indigenous Koyukon call Sołt'aanh.

"Where?" I asked over the headset. All I could see was a wall of mist.

"Not there," he said. "*Up there.*"

I strained to look where he pointed through the Cessna's blue plexiglass, and far up in the clouds, higher than any earthly thing should be, shimmered the ghostly silhouette of a mountain.

Adventure is the world's oldest subject. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and *Beowulf* are all adventure tales. We all think we know what it is. But ironically, much of what we presume to know about adventure is what has been absorbed amid the comfort of our own homes. Movies and television show us that adventure is nothing more than an amusement park ride; an exhilarating series



of close calls that—*never fear*—the protagonist will overcome before the final credits roll. And there's no doubt that it's satisfying to sit by the fire reading how in 1953, in thin air and bitter cold, Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay staggered the last few steps to the top of the world.

But those experiences are not adventure; they are entertainment.

So, it's often a shock when we find ourselves in a real adventure for the first time. Far from help. It's getting dark. We are too hot, too cold, too dirty, sick, hungry, thirsty, exhausted, exasperated and frightened to go on. That's when we want to close the book. We want to switch off the screen and go upstairs to bed. But we can't. Because a real adventure doesn't stop when we're hungry, scared or tired. In fact, that's when it begins—out at

that lonely threshold where all plans fail and there's no guarantee of a happy ending.

In Latin the prefix *ad* means "in the direction of"—to be drawn toward. *Venture* is a risky undertaking, a daring journey or course of action. Therefore, to engage in adventure is to be drawn toward challenge, risk and the unknown.

The axial word here being *risk*. Because regardless of the form it takes, adventure always contains risk, either physical, psychological, financial or all three. There is the possibility of failure and embarrassment, the potential for discomfort, loss, suffering, injury or death.

And where there is risk, there is fear.

In this way, the relationship we form with adventure determines how we live our lives, because in an uncertain world, nothing can

be accomplished without risk, and no risk can be taken without understanding how to work with fear.

For the mythologist Joseph Campbell, adventure was finding the courage to leave the safety of what is known and familiar in order to discover one's own unique path. Campbell believed that all external adventures, and all the myths and legends surrounding such experiences, are metaphors for this essential internal quest to find the "Grail" of one's true purpose, one's "bliss," as he called it. And, as he noted, to set out on that journey requires extraordinary strength in order to escape society's constant efforts to shape us into who it wants us to be.

ON THE EVENING OF our third day in the Alaska Range, Rick Wyatt, Evelyn Lees, Kelley McKean and I stood on the cornices guarding Kahiltna Pass. Below us stretched the Peters Glacier, the passageway to the north of Denali. Until then we had been traveling with other parties bound for the West Buttress, the most popular route up the mountain. But our hope was to make the second ascent of the Canadian Route on the Wickersham Wall, a route located on Denali's north side, and then for Rick to make the first ski descent of the face. In 1983 only a handful of people had visited that part of the mountain since the two routes were first climbed in 1963, so there was no trail to follow from Kahiltna Pass.

There are occasions in modern life when one can see that the original world has been broken and its pieces scattered. In three days of skiing to this threshold between the known and the unknown, my companions and I had come to a place where the primeval world still stood whole and unaltered. A world admittedly harsher and more unforgiving than our own, yet at the same time more ancient, more honest, and steeped in radiance.

To participate in a wilderness adventure in a place like the Alaska Range is to feel as the French novelist André Malraux once wrote: "Now I am in a story." And when we live in a story, life becomes mythic.

What does that mean?

Life becomes mythic when it shines with

an unambiguous sense of purpose, as a lamp glows with light. Life becomes mythic when it is distilled to its essence. When there is only one thing to do in a day, and I know immediately whether I have done it well.

In today's world, we are taught that to call something a myth means it's imaginary or untrue. But from another perspective, myths are always and eternally true. They tell the story not of individuals, but of the human spirit—and not in one particular time and place, but in an eternal present that exists everywhere and nowhere save the human heart.

The way to that enchanted realm is not



hard to find. As I learned in Alaska, all one has to do is rise each morning before the sun touches the tent, when the frost is a white fur covering sleeping bags and nylon walls. Light the stove with fingers stiff and swollen from the cold. Crawl outside and empty the night's pee bottle. Stretch and gaze in awe as the light rises over a sea of white mountains. Whether one has experienced it or not, it is a dance remembered, a rhythm recalled.

AT THE END OF the first day of climbing, my teammates and I made camp in an enormous amphitheater with the entire Wickersham Wall

unfurling above us. We knew it was a dangerous camp, frightfully exposed to avalanches, but the snow was waist deep, a merciless bog of unconsolidated crystals the consistency of sugar. Moving through it was more like swimming than climbing. Even though the Jeffery Ridge offered better protection only half a mile away, we were too exhausted to reach it. So, as mountaineers facing such choices always do, we rationalized, telling ourselves we were far enough out in the basin to escape all but the biggest slides.

We were cooking outside the tents when it began. First a crack, then a deep boom like the earth shifting in its sleep. Three thousand feet above there was a puff of white.

I saw the curtains of ice begin to fall and started running backward. Backward because I couldn't take my eyes off the spectacle, even as the bile rose in my throat and the hair stood on my head. Stumbling, gasping, then struggling to run again. Eventually I fell, mired in the depth hoar, helpless to escape the fate hurtling from above.

The avalanche blossomed as it fell, filling the sky. It skimmed over hanging seracs, gathering mass and speed. Everyone was yelling now at the top of their lungs. But the roar of the slide drowned all other sound.

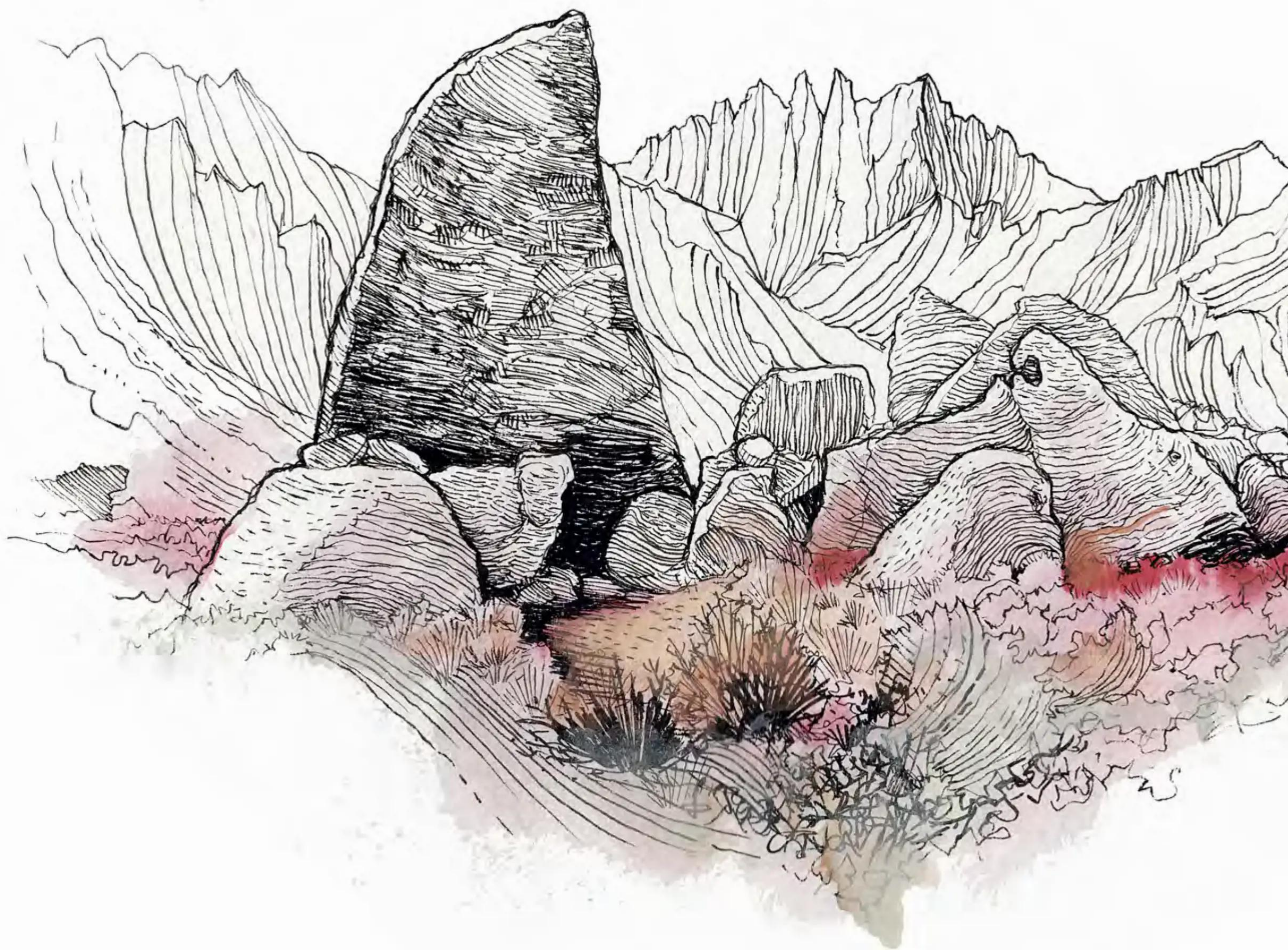
Then, only a thousand feet away, the main mass of the avalanche vanished. Miraculously, the force of the slide was swallowed by a series of giant crevasses that lay unseen between us and the upper wall.

But that didn't stop the wind.

Avalanches push a mass of air ahead of them as they fall. The gust hit the camp like a hurricane, transforming a sunny afternoon into a raging blizzard. Stoves, pots and pans went flying. Tents reared against their lines. When it was over we were left standing in our underwear, frosted as though we had been dipped in icing.

As we slowly realized that we had been spared, we began to whoop and dance about like lunatics. We were staring across the dark threshold—then in the next instant our sentence was commuted and life restored. It was different now, though, luminous and magical in every way. In the space of a heartbeat





everything had changed, and we were suddenly drunk out of our minds on the intoxication of simply being alive.

Several days later, as I stood outside my tent, and the clouds spread below me like a smoking prairie in the sunset, I thought that if I could learn only one lesson from this adventure, it would be to spend the rest of my life moving toward those things my heart knows are precious. If only I could do that, then all the effort, discomfort and risk would seem a small price to pay.

So, I prayed that just as the struggle affected me, so too would the beauty and the awe—not

just intellectually, but physiologically. In some way, I hoped that what I was experiencing on Denali would remain within me always, vivid and alive.

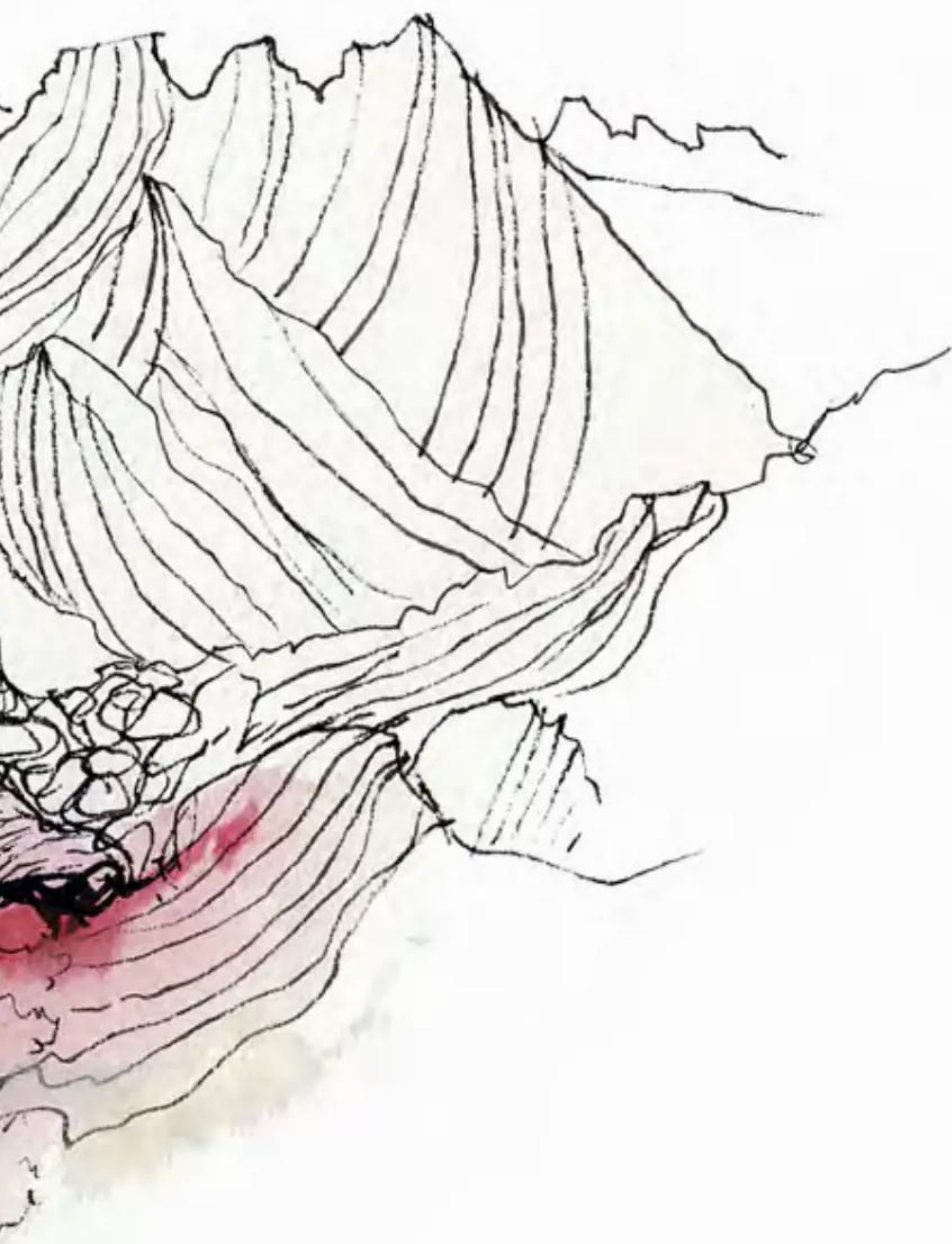
ON THE NINTH DAY of climbing, Kelley and I reached the north summit of Denali. After a week of good weather, the lenticular cloud had returned to crown the mountain, that bright lens of supercooled condensation that hovers over high peaks signaling high winds aloft.

In the shelter of the ridge, out of the roaring wind, we crouched to read the thermometer: -25°F. When I tried to tap loose the lid on

my water bottle, it shattered like glass. Later, on the ridge crest, unprotected from the force of the gale, we reeled along like drunkards.

All that day in the wind, Rick had carried his skis strapped to his pack as he climbed with Evelyn, his girlfriend, hoping for a break that would allow him to ski from the top. But when Kelley and I reached the top, we could only glance down the north face. Any more than that and we risked our eyelids freezing shut.

Meanwhile, feeling herself losing the fight against the cold, Evelyn had stopped short of the summit. Realizing he wouldn't be able to ski that day, Rick turned back with her. Both



When we halloosed, only Rick responded. He didn't bother to unzip the tent. In words devoid of emotion, he described the accident and informed us that his attempt to ski the wall was over; our focus was now traversing the mountain to carry Evelyn and all our gear from the north side of Denali to the West Buttress, then back down to the landing strip at Kahiltna Base, where she could be flown to Anchorage.

THREE DAYS LATER RICK and I stood holding Evelyn between us at the medical research camp at 14,200 feet on the West Buttress. The setting was ghostly. The evening rays of the sun had faded. To the south clouds hung in an unbroken wave, a pastel backdrop slung across a cobalt sky. Out of that phosphorescence a delicate bubble of plexiglass and steel appeared, signal lights flashing.

The helicopter came in dead level. "Two victims, no baggage" had been the instructions over the radio. All personal equipment had to be left behind.

In seconds it was over. The helicopter touched down amid a typhoon of snow. We handed up Evelyn, along with a woman from another team who was suffering from frostbite.

We had not requested a rescue. Storm winds had prevented the helicopter from landing at 17,000 feet to pick up a more seriously injured climber—so as not to waste the flight, the rangers had radioed down that they would pick up the two injured women at 14,000 feet instead.

Moments later the aircraft was nothing more than a blur of winking lights fleeing southwest, as insubstantial and illusory as all our hopes and dreams.

I was twenty-eight years old. It was the end of my first expedition. Our small, inexperienced team had completed the first alpine ascent of the Canadian Route on the Wickersham Wall. We had climbed one of the largest mountain faces on Earth, making the second ascent of a remote and dangerous climb that had not seen a successful party in twenty years. Yet the knowledge that without a moment's misfortune Rick could have skied the wall haunted me, leaving our success feeling hollow and betrayed.

During those last days on the mountain, struggling with the double load of disappointment and effort, I began to understand how wide the gap is between the adventures we dream and those we live. The story I found on

Denali was not the story I had come to tell. How could I reconcile the two?

For me the ascent of the Wickersham was not an end, it was the beginning of a life-long career documenting adventure around the world. But the experience taught me an essential lesson. Adventure is never what we expect. When we try to capture it, describe it, it vanishes from the viewfinder. It wriggles off the page.

Again and again, adventure teaches us that between our dreams and reality lies a chasm, deep and wide. The adventure we experience out in the world is not entertainment. It is not someone else's story. It is our own, and to earn it, we may have to ransom all that we hold dear. As the storyteller Laura Simms observes, "The most serious threshold in every story calls forth our greatest fear or attachment to the world as we know it."

So, what is adventure?

For me, it is a process that allows me to pursue my full potential, to live as much as possible, with confidence, boldness and grace. It is the determination to keep going, no matter how long and dark the journey. It is a spirit that engages the world with curiosity and playful joy.

At its most basic, adventure asks us: "Do you want to read the story? Or do you want to *be* the story?"

There's no doubt that climbing and skiing in the world's great ranges is adventure. But adventure is also grabbing a guitar and heading out on the road to become an itinerant musician. Adventure is the first day of class. It's leaving a small town to try to make it in the big city. It's overcoming physical and emotional handicaps, and taking a stand against ignorance, prejudice and injustice. And of course, falling in love is always an adventure, perhaps the most perilous of all.

FINISHING MY BEER at the Fairview Inn, I leave the bar and head for my solitary tent at the Talkeetna airfield. Crossing the railroad tracks, I pause and look north. Even though it's nearly midnight, the sky still smolders. Rising out of black forests like a curtain of light stands the Alaska Range. Irresistibly, the eye is drawn to Denali, its summit glowing like a beacon 20,000 feet above where I stand.

I realize that eventually I will have to turn and walk away.

—Chris Noble, *Castle Valley, Utah*

thought they would have another chance.

As Kelley and I fought our way through the storm, we had no way of knowing that Evelyn fell during their descent. She had traded her ice axe for one of Rick's Ramer ski poles and was unable to self-arrest. When she stopped falling, she had a broken wrist and a fractured pelvis. She was lucky. If she had gone farther, she would have slid over the edge of the face, and from there it was 10,000 feet down to the glacier below.

Elated by our success, yet exhausted by our efforts, Kelley and I stumbled into our dark and silent high camp on the Wickersham.

MOUNTAIN PROFILE

Taboma/Mt. Rainier | David Gladish



A Mountain of Many Names

S*woosh, slide, swoosh, slide*—the sound of my skis gliding uphill, and the squeak of the Styrofoam-like snow underneath my feet, breaks the silence of an otherwise soundless temple. The crystal blue of the sky above me softens the landscape. The texture of the terrain changes as we climb higher, with the snow becoming heavier, akin to creamy mashed potatoes. My skis form deep tracks, two parallel plow marks, while the baskets of my poles create imprints like giant

snowflakes dotting the landscape. The enormity of Mt. Rainier—its sweeping snowy ridges, black walls of rock and icy slopes—comes into view as we make our way onto the Van Trump Glacier. The wind howls and snow starts to blow. I pull my hood over my helmet as a shiver runs down my back. Yet my soul is lit up and I feel warm inside. A sense of peace and calm pervades despite the preposterously large glaciers, crumbling cliffs and mammoth seracs that loom above.

[Photo] The aurora dances over Mt. Rainier, just as it did when Arnie Campbell, Jim Borrow and Ome Daiber climbed Liberty Ridge together in 1935. Mark Stewart



SOUTH ASPECT

MT. RAINIER

A Columbia Crest **B** Liberty Cap **C** Little Tahoma
1 Gibraltar Ledges (II, Stevens–Van Trump, 1870) **2** Ingraham Glacier Direct (II, FA unknown) **3** Disappointment Cleaver (II, FA unknown) **4** Sunset Ridge (III, Boyer–Campbell–Woods, 1938) **5** Tahoma Glacier (II, Van Trump–Drewry–Riley, 1891) **6** Emmons and Winthrop Glaciers (II, FA unknown) **7** Curtis Ridge (IV, Prater–Schuster, 1957) **8** Willis Wall routes **9** Liberty Ridge (III or IV, Daiber–Campbell–Borrow, 1935) **10** Ptarmigan Ridge (IV, Bauer–Hossack, 1935) **11** North Mowich Icefall (IV, Wickwire–Schaller, 1970) **12** Central Mowich Face (III, Molenaar–Prater–Wickwire–Pargeter, 1966) **13** Edmunds Headwall (III, Rupley–Claunch–Beckey–Hornbein–Staley, 1957). Mike Gauthier (all)



NORTH-NORTHEAST ASPECT



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS MOUNTAIN in my life is not measured by how many times I've ascended it, how difficult the climbing is or how often I've visited. It bestows feelings of utter delight, a sense of independence, of commitment and sometimes fear within me, whether I'm standing on its flanks or staring at it from afar.

A symbol of beauty, metaphor and contradictions, of both highs and lows, Mt. Rainier—or Tahoma, as it is often referred to by the Indigenous people, though there are many names—stands as a backdrop for freedom, possibilities and promise. Rising up from the valleys, and seemingly out of the sea, the mountain is a beacon for millions of people. On a clear day you can see its vast glaciers and summits from miles away, sparking passion, fear and wonder even for those who have never set foot on it before.

The Magnetic Pull of Tahoma

MT. RAINIER IS WHAT ENTICED ME, a Pennsylvania boy with little mountaineering experience, to move my life across the country at age twenty-six. It was 2013. I packed up my trusty beat-up truck, named Gloria, and drove 850 miles northwest from my latest dirt-bagging outpost in Salt Lake City. I arrived at the home of my friend Eric, the only person I knew in the city at the time. He let me live rent-free in a shack in his backyard while I figured out how to achieve my dream of becoming a mountaineer. I quickly got a job at Marmot Mountain Works, an esteemed climbing shop. It was full of crusty climbers and backcountry skiers, and I was intent on building friendships and finding partners to climb mountains. That summer, after a winter spent with my newfound co-workers and friends, particularly a woman named Kristy, I climbed Rainier and its subpeak Little Tahoma. The mountain became a keystone in my development as a mountaineer. It would reel me in time and again, shaping my life through meaningful climbs and important life moments. That same pull has called to mountaineers from around the globe, beckoning them to this training ground for historic first ascents and shaping climbing history in America.

The sheer size and magnitude of Rainier, the challenging weather patterns, the glaciated terrain and the relatively high elevation make the mountain one of the most sought-after summits in the country. It is much more than that, though, as it holds meaning for a wider, more diverse population beyond just the climbing community. Indigenous people have been visiting the mountain for thousands of years, long before white men asserted their claims of first ascents. In the last few hundred years, recreationists, skiers, backpackers, hikers, naturalists and tourists have flocked to the peak, drawn to its diverse ecosystems and varied terrain. Today, approximately two million people visit Mt. Rainier National Park, eighty miles southeast of Seattle, Washington, each year. At the same time, the mountain is suffering great losses. As glaciers shrink and disappear amid ongoing climate change,



endangered animals such as the white-tailed ptarmigan face extinction and weather becomes more extreme.

A Staggering Array of Resources

AROUND 500,000 YEARS AGO, VOLCANIC eruptions began bursting from underneath the Earth's surface in what we now know as Washington state. As magma erupted and bubbled from the collision zone of the Juan de Fuca Plate and the North American Plate, it escaped through fault zones and started crafting a volcano. Mt. Rainier rose to become what is now the tallest mountain in Washington state and, at 14,410 feet, the fifth highest in the contiguous United States.

Evidence shows that Rainier was once taller and more massive than the mountain we see today. Mudflows, or lahars—caused by volcanic heat melting snow and ice—shaped the peak, breaking it down by removing massive amounts of soil and earth. Unlike at Mt. St. Helens, its nearby neighbor that famously blew its top in 1980, lahars are Rainier's greatest geological hazard.

The mountain's more than twenty-five named glaciers cascade and bend among rocky spires. The Emmons Glacier, larger than any glacier in the contiguous United States, flows down from the summit, careening into the White River, which flows milky white with silt and glacial runoff. The river is home to salmon, once innumerable here, beloved and revered by the people of the Northwest since prehistory.

Below the peak, nearly 500 rivers and streams, acres of wetland waterfalls and mineral springs create a lush, almost junglelike sanctuary, where many different plants and animals live within the national park's borders.

Driven by the vast number of resources, Indigenous peoples have been visiting the mountain for thousands of years, seeking precious commodities they couldn't find in their dwelling places in the valleys below.

[This Page] Author David Gladish skins up toward Van Trump Park near Mt. Rainier. Kristine Kleedeahn | [Facing Page, Left] An engraving of a Nuu-chah-nulth village, on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, as published in the 1784 recounting of Captain

James Cook's third voyage. George Vancouver was on that trip. He returned over a decade later and named Mt. Rainier. | [Facing Page, Right] A depiction of the peak from the late 1700s, as seen from Admiralty Inlet. Washington State Historical Society (both)



Before Rainier

WARREN KINGGEORGE LIVES IN MUCKLESHOOT, on the tip of a plateau south of Seattle. There are rivers on either side of his community—the Green and the White. The silty waters of the White River swirl and flow past Muckleshoot all the way from the Emmons Glacier on Mt. Rainier, or *təqʷubəʔ* as it is known to the Muckleshoot Tribe, for which KingGeorge serves as a historian.

Təqʷubəʔ is important to the Muckleshoot people for many reasons: its rivers provide water, the ecosystems around its slopes share sustenance and its massive presence helps create a sense of direction.

“It really does represent something both literally and metaphorically larger than life,” said KingGeorge. “It keeps us humble. It reminds us of our place and our roles here as humans in the Pacific Northwest.”

Much of KingGeorge’s knowledge of the mountain comes from stories told to him by his own teachers. He recalls a story his uncle once shared, about the helpers, or guardian spirits, that once existed in the Cascade Mountains. At some point long ago, recounted KingGeorge, a man went to *təqʷubəʔ* to obtain a helper. The helper told the man that when he died, the lake where they met would burst and flow down the mountain, covering parts of the lowlands. The timing of the man’s death coincided with the last lahar. Meanwhile, these helpers went away as the area was settled.

The Muckleshoot Tribe is just one of six tribes who have lived in the vicinity of Mt. Rainier since long before Captain George Vancouver “discovered” the mountain in 1792. Vancouver chose to name the peak after a friend of his, Rear Admiral Peter Rainier, ignoring the names that already existed. The Puyallup, Squaxin, Nisqually, Cowlitz, Yakama and Muckleshoot peoples have different variations of names for the mountain, none of which resemble the word Rainier. Instead, Indigenous Americans know the mountain as Tahoma, Takhoma, Tacoma, Ta Ko Ba, Ta-co-bet and Taqo ma, among other names. In some cases, these names refer generally to snowy peaks. Other meanings draw more specifically on one of the resources, water, that it provides.

Indigenous peoples have been visiting Tahoma to connect with their ancestors, hunt, gather berries and practice spirituality for thousands of years, yet until the 1960s there persisted a long-held belief that they avoided the high country on the mountain, sticking instead

to the lower-elevation valleys and rivers. KingGeorge said there is some truth, from what he’s been told, to the understanding that going to the top of the mountain was considered taboo. “We weren’t born with goat wool, so we have no business up there,” explained KingGeorge. But he said there are stories of his ancestors attempting to ascend the mountain, at which time they would try to bring back something to prove they had done it. Yet, they found they could only descend successfully after returning that proof to the mountain. KingGeorge said they would also travel over the mountain to reach other tribes.

In the early 1960s, scientists from Washington State University found the highest known archaeological site in Washington on at 5,400 feet on Mt. Rainier. The team found knives, scrapers and projectile points. Since that important unearthing, an abundance of archaeological finds have been discovered, proving that Indigenous people have been visiting Rainier’s mid-elevation slopes for over 9,000 years, at over 100 locations, primarily for hunting and gathering.

“Finding the Fryingpan Creek site really started to break open and tear apart the whole idea of bias in Native people avoiding the mountain,” said Jeff Antonelis-Lapp, author of the book *Tahoma and Its People*.

While it’s not clear how high early Indigenous people climbed on the mountain, there is a strong oral history pointing toward Indigenous ascents. Arthur C. Ballard, an enthusiastic linguist and translator, recorded stories from local tribes in the early 1900s and published a book, *Mythology of Southern Puget Sound*, in 1929. Ballard wrote down oral stories told to him by Indigenous people describing ascents on Tahoma. In the first version of a story titled “The Young Man’s Ascent of Mount Rainier,” the tale begins: “This story is not a *sXwivə*’b (myth). The man in this story was a real person.” The story, which was related to Ballard by Tom Milroy of the Upper Puyallup tribe, speaks of a man using five wedges of elkhorn to chisel steps in the ice and snow. The wedges wore out until he reached the top of *T’qo’bəd*.

In a second version, told to Ballard by Joe Young of the Puyallup tribe, the grandfather of his grandmother summited the mountain using twenty arrows with copper points, two at a time, to help him climb. On the descent, he was caught in a blizzard and “in places he lost his footing and went under the crust,” according to *Mythology of Southern Puget Sound*.

ONE FOOT, TWO CRUTCHES, one foot, two crutches. In a hopping step, Sarah Doherty arrived at the peak of Mt. Rainier's snowcapped expanse and took in the beauty below her. It was early August of 1984, and she had just become the first female amputee to reach the volcano's summit.

Four decades later, in the autumn of 2023, I received an email from *Alpinist* editor Paula LaRoche asking if I'd look into Doherty's climbing life for a potential story. Doherty had passed away unexpectedly earlier that year. A quick Google search turned up a few obituaries, a slew of social media posts grieving her passing and a now defunct Associated Press article titled "One-Legged Woman Aims for Mount McKinley." I was intrigued.

At age thirteen, Doherty lost her right leg to a drunk driver, but the accident didn't stop her from pursuing athletics. By 1983 Doherty had become a nationally ranked paraskier and she moved to Seattle to access the sport year-round. Soon, she began climbing with the guidance of her new friend Wade Harness, who was welcoming and provided her with opportunities in climbing that she had once been excluded from. Doherty also started working with a prosthetist to design a specialized crutch that would allow her to walk more efficiently on snow. Soon, drawing on her new skills, improved tools and inspiration from Don Bennett, the first amputee to summit Mt. Rainier in 1982, Doherty decided she wanted to climb the peak too.

Within a year, Doherty began training by climbing the nearby Mt. Si, running laps up and down the bleachers in a stadium near her home and fine-tuning her snow climbing technique on Rainier's lower slopes. Having grown up in the lowlands of Taunton, Massachusetts, she worked hard to get her lungs acclimated for the thin air high on Rainier.

By August 3, 1984, Doherty felt ready, and she set out for the summit along with Harness and three other climbers. At around 13,000 feet Doherty lost the ice pick fitted on the bottom of one of her crutches while jumping over a crevasse. The incident delayed the team and Doherty almost lost hope for the summit. She



wondered why she chose to put herself through the pain and discomfort of mountaineering. But her team kept her spirits up and they pushed on. Later, on the summit, she understood why. The view stretched on and on beneath her. She could see the Pacific Ocean to the west and the Cascade Mountains to the east.

After the exhausted team staggered back to sea level and returned to their daily lives, Doherty found herself in the limelight. She started fielding calls from reporters, and she was invited to New York to appear on *Good Morning America*.

While researching Doherty last year, I had many teary conversations with her husband Kerith Perreur-Lloyd, as he told me about the love of his life. I felt his pain and found myself crying silently on the other side of the phone. I also spoke with many other significant people in Doherty's life—Bill Sumner and Matt Kerns, Doherty's climbing partners; her daughter Hannah Kellett; and Fred Dunham, Doherty's longtime friend. As the picture of Doherty formed more clearly in my mind, it soon became hard to write about her like a journalist. It felt like I was penning a tribute to an old friend.

While I was writing the story, Perreur-Lloyd found an unidentified newspaper clipping in the attic of the house he had shared with Doherty. It claimed that Doherty's teammates carried her gear up Mt. Rainier for her. I raised an eyebrow. It didn't sound like Doherty.

Sumner told me he remembers it differently. He met Doherty during her historic ascent of Rainier, though they were on different climbing teams. Sumner remembers Doherty carrying a

full mountaineer's load as she climbed on her one leg and two specially designed crutches. Doherty and Sumner would later climb Denali together as she became the first amputee, man or woman, to summit North America's tallest peak.

I wondered how Doherty felt when she read that article. Did she notice the inaccuracy? Did the reporter get it wrong by falling into the trap of falsely assuming disabled athletes' abilities? Did they have an archetype in their mind that influenced their descriptions of Doherty? I saw similar things in other newspaper clippings.

After spending eight months reporting on Doherty, I imagined her chuckling as she carefully cut out the article to save. I don't think she would have been mad. She didn't climb for accolades or fame. In a typed-up account of her Denali expedition, Doherty wrote that being disabled "wasn't as much a physical problem, as a social problem." She noted that people assumed her to be "brave" for simple things like going to the store, and "crazy" for doing something she enjoyed. Even now you see the same tropes in mainstream media. Athletes with disabilities are labeled "inspirations" for showing up at the crag. It is a term that many paraclimbers and para-athletes dislike because it others them for doing what everyone else loves to do, like climb.

Thinking of Doherty brings back memories of a summer I spent in the Pacific Northwest in 2020. For much of that time I was alone and grieving about lost loves, lost time and lost opportunities because of the pandemic. I drove to Paradise and hiked until I could see Mt. Rainier. There were no wildflowers in bloom, but I closed my eyes and imagined them, keeping my eyes closed until I tripped. As I lay on the dirt and stared up at the sky, I remember laughing at my own clumsiness.

Now, with inspiration from Doherty, I've started making plans to climb Rainier myself next summer. I'm inspired by her not because she was brave for doing it on one leg, but because she reminds me of why so many of us climb: to push past the discomfort to see the view from up high.

Someone wrote on Facebook after Doherty's passing: "I never met her, but she changed my life." By the time my story remembering Doherty was published in *Alpinist* 86, I felt the same.

“What the teller of the story [relayed to Ballard] encountered on the summit was an underground lake, and sure enough there is an underground lake on the summit of Mt. Rainier that still exists today,” said Antonelis-Lapp, who developed strong relationships with Indigenous elders from various tribes while writing his book. “How would they know about a lake on the summit if they hadn’t been there?”

While there is no physical proof that Indigenous Americans made the first ascent of Tahoma, and two white men (Hazard Stevens and Philemon Van Trump) are the recognized first ascensionists, Cal’ Smith, who upholds the legacy of Native American guides on Tahoma, believes there certainly were Native climbers who came before him. Smith is a member of the Yakama Nation and the director of winter programming for Climbers of Color, a nonprofit climbing organization in Washington.

“It’s incredibly naïve for a captain in the military [like Stevens] to think that the Natives didn’t climb and visit these places,” said Smith. He believes that tales like these are used to promote the idea that white people were the first climbers on Tahoma.

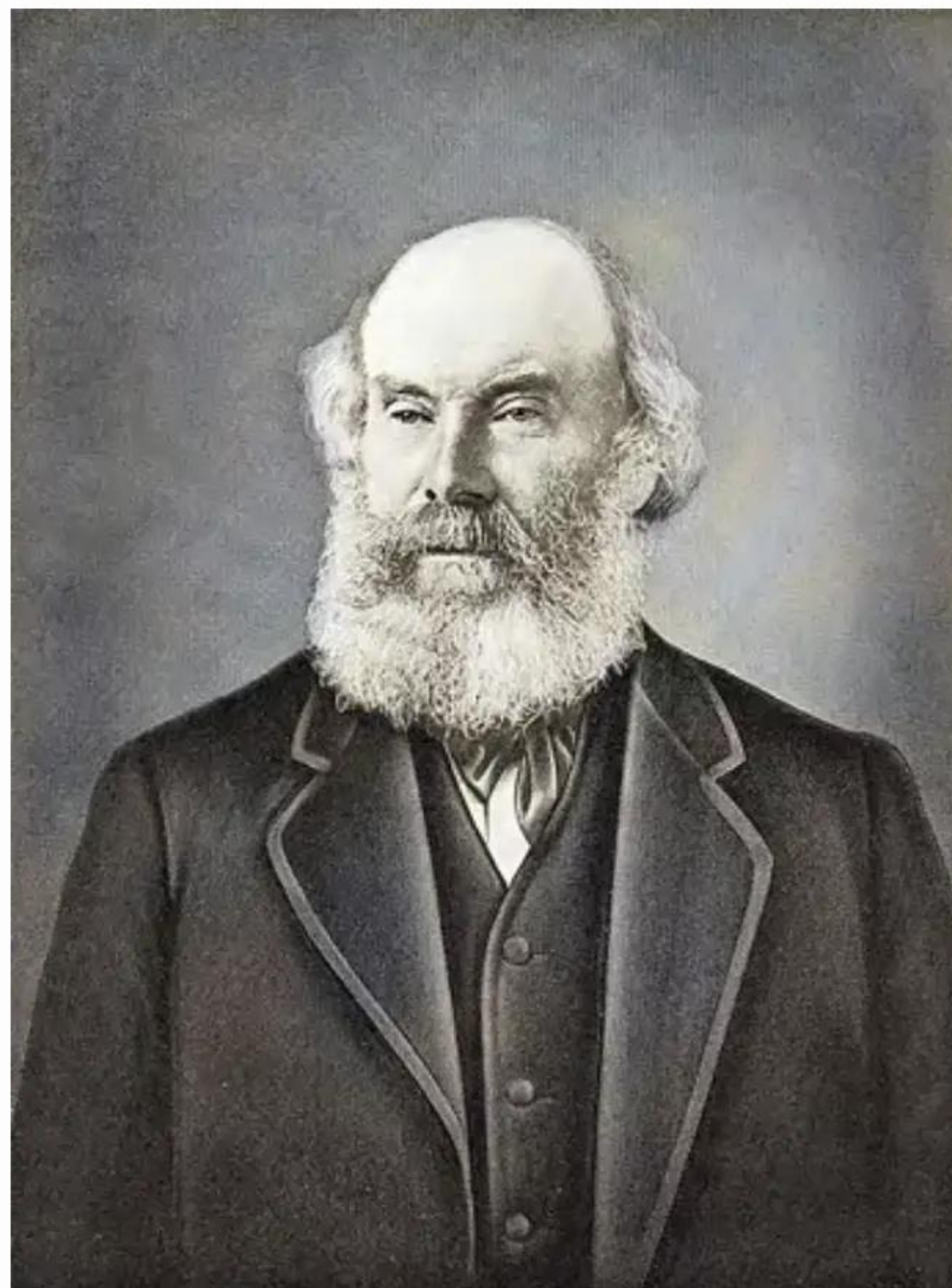
In any case, there is no doubt that Indigenous people played a pivotal role in guiding white men to the top of the mountain.

Glacial Discoveries

WILLIAM TOLMIE, A BOTANIST AND surgeon from Scotland, was the first white man to approach what is now Mt. Rainier National Park and confirm the existence of glaciers on the mountain’s upper slopes in the early 1800s. His intimate observations of the mountain landscape came in an unlikely and roundabout way.

Following a long boat journey to Ft. Nisqually, approximately seventy-five miles from Mt. Rainier, he started working for a fur trading company. In August 1833, Tolmie received permission to leave his post for ten days. He set out toward the mountain, intent on gathering medicinal herbs and studying the botany of the area, accompanied by five Indigenous guides: Lachalet, Lashima, Nuckalkut, Quilniash and one unnamed guide. Tolmie recorded in his journal that they traveled along the Puyallup River, sleeping poorly under a drizzling rain, navigating steep banks and “dense, strangled thickets” on horseback and eating fish they caught in the river. He noted that his stamina was far inferior to that of his companions.

By September 1, despite it raining “almost incessantly,” Tolmie proposed the party climb one of the snowy peaks above them the following day. Indeed, the next day, they “ascended that [peak] which showed the most snow.” Tolmie, Lachalet and Nuckalkut went on



to the top, where they were met with very dense clouds. The next day, after spending the night on the mountain, Tolmie and Quilniash returned to the summit of the snowy peak. With better visibility, Mt. Rainier “appeared surpassingly splendid and magnificent,” Tolmie wrote. Getting his bearings, he observed the mountain’s features, including glaciers, volcanic rock and “craggs scantily covered by stunted pines.” His account provided evidence that the mountain could be climbed—likely, he theorized, from the peak’s southwest aspect. Tolmie observed a few small glaciers on the conical portion of the mountain, making him perhaps the first white man to make note of the existence of glaciers in the contiguous United States, according to Dee Molenaar in *The Challenge of Rainier*.

Early Climbing Attempts

DECADES LATER, DESPITE TOLMIE’S EFFORTS and the knowledge garnered from his reconnaissance, there still weren’t any solid accounts of anyone attempting to climb the mountain itself. The accounts that do exist between Tolmie’s expedition and the most recognized first ascent of the peak are met with scrutiny.

In 1852, a party of three, possibly four, was scouting the area for a trans-Cascade wagon route, to connect the Puget Sound to the eastern side of the Cascades. They may have reached an altitude of 14,000 feet, but according to *The Challenge of Rainier*, “the principal account suffers from being presented by the editor of a frontier newspaper.” The editor may have been on the side of the explorers looking to promote the idea of development and settlement via the wagon route, and thus might have had incentive to bend the truth about an ascent of the mountain.

The second expedition, as recounted by Paul Schullery in the book *Island in the Sky*, involved two white men who were participating in surveying the boundary of the Yakama Indian Reservation and their Indigenous guide. The unnamed white men supposedly reached the summit around 1854 or 1855, via the northern slopes, where they left a cairn at the summit crater. The only evidence to suggest they ascended the mountain comes from their guide, Saluskin, who shared hazy recollections during an oral interview with historian Lucullus McWhorter in 1915. “It is both ironic and entertaining that, if the story is true, Mount Rainier, one of the great early ‘trophies’ of climbers in this country, should have first been ascended by men who did not even bother to take credit for their accomplishment,” Schullery concluded.

In a less hazy narrative, a summit-obsessed soldier described nearly making it to the top a few years later. In mid-July 1857, the

[Facing Page] **Sarah Doherty on Denali (20,310') in 1985. Doherty became the first amputee to summit North America’s tallest peak. Matt Kerns, one of her climbing partners, wrote fondly of Doherty in *The American Alpine Journal* the following year: “I**

don’t believe she was attempting Denali to be the first amputee to reach the summit. She seemed to have nothing to prove.” Doherty had climbed Rainier in 1984. Bill Sumner | [This Page] **William Fraser Tolmie, printed in 1903. University of British Columbia**

upper flanks of Rainier were climbed by Lieutenant August V. Kautz, who was accompanied by two other soldiers, an Indigenous guide named Wapowety and a doctor. The five men, plus two additional soldiers, left from Ft. Steilacoom just south of what is now the city of Tacoma. It appears that Kautz's motivation to climb the mountain was purely for the sake of reaching its top, not for surveying, resource extraction or glory. He was, as he shared in an essay published in *Mount Rainier: A Record of Exploration* in 1916, "fond of visiting unexplored sections of the country, and possessed of a very prevailing passion for going to the tops of high places."

After traversing, hiking and climbing for seven days from where they left their horses—at the Mishawh Prairie thousands of feet below, in the care of two of the soldiers—the team of Kautz, the other two soldiers, the doctor and Wapowety set out on their final push. The group of intrepid explorers had walked for five days to the Nisqually Glacier, on the south side of the mountain, wading through swift rivers that filled their boots with gravel and sand, scrambling up near-vertical glacier moraines and crossing glacier ice with a dark blue tinge. Fatigue began to set in a week after they started out on foot from the base of the mountain, and Kautz's team began to drop like flies. First Wapowety and one of the soldiers in the early afternoon, then the doctor and finally another soldier could go no further. Kautz pressed on, despite ice forming on his canteen, temperatures cold enough to freeze to death and wind so fierce that it blew his hat off, never to be seen again. He turned around just a few hundred feet from the summit, exhausted.

The Kautz Glacier, the route of the lieutenant's attempt, involves rockfall and icefall hazards, glacier travel and snow and ice slopes up to forty-five degrees. To finally reach the top of the mountain more than a decade later, two Washington climbers eventually chose an easier route.

Don't Go! Don't Go!

IN THE SUMMER OF 1870, after nearly three years of meticulous planning, Hazard Stevens and Philemon Van Trump left Olympia with the goal of becoming the first people to stand atop Mt. Rainier. Stevens, the son of former Washington Territorial Governor Isaac Stevens, had faced hardship before. He survived being shot during the Civil War, in the Battle of Chantilly, and later earned the Medal of Honor for aiding in the capture of Fort Huger in 1863, at the ripe age of twenty. His compatriot, Van Trump, was a private secretary to the territorial governor of Washington. They were joined by Edmund T. Coleman, an English travel writer, artist and member of the Alpine Club, and an early advocate of mountaineering in America. He had completed the first recorded ascent of Mt. Baker two years prior to the Rainier expedition and was seen as an asset to the first ascent



attempt. Sluisin, an Indigenous guide, was the final member of the party. He provided direction and guidance that was instrumental to the success of the expedition.

From Olympia, Stevens, Van Trump and Coleman made their way thirty miles east in a horse-driven carriage to the homestead of James Longmire (which would later become the national park headquarters). They were delighted for Longmire's counsel and expertise on the area, yet Longmire didn't have the time to guide them much farther than his homestead, not wanting to leave his harvest and an impending cattle drive. From Longmire's place, the party proceeded toward the mountain. There weren't yet any roads to ease their travel, so instead, as Van Trump later wrote in a trip report, they passed through "almost impenetrable forests and entangling thickets, over innumerable prostrate logs and along occasional open river bars." Longmire stayed with the party long enough to help them find an Indigenous camp he knew of along the Cowlitz River, where he hoped to connect the climbing party with a suitable guide. The camp was deserted except for a single family. One of the members of that family, Sluisin, agreed to a wage of a dollar per day to guide them to the base of Mt. Rainier. According to Aubrey L. Haines in *Mountain*

[This Page, Top Left] **General August V. Kautz.** US National Archives | [This Page, Top Right] **Hazard Stevens and Philemon Van Trump with their summit flag.** Washington State Historical Society | [This Page, Bottom] **John Muir's climbing party on the summit in 1888—the first time a photo was taken at the top.** "I made my negatives and nearly froze my

arms," photographer Arthur Warner wrote in a personal account of the trip published in the 1956 issue of *The Mountaineer*. "I hardly know whether I had better try to describe the view but will say that for the first time I could see that the world was round, and I was up on a very high place." Arthur Churchill Warner Photographs Collection

Fever: Historic Conquests of Rainier, Sluiskin was wounded—he had a shattered hand from a bullet that hit him during the Battle of Grande Ronde—yet he knew the way, having previously hunted in the area.

From Sluiskin's camp, the party approached the mountain along the crest of the Tatoosh Range, just south of Rainier, then dropped down to the vicinity of Reflection Lakes, not more than three miles from Paradise, a meadowed area where one of today's busiest visitor centers on the mountain is located. Coleman quickly fell behind on the approach to the mountain before they reached the lakes, having dropped his cumbersome pack down a steep cliff, then searching in vain and never finding it. When Sluiskin could not find Coleman right away, the party of three continued without him, ascending parts of Mazama Ridge to their final camp.

Upon making camp, discussion ensued regarding the plan for the next day's summit attempt. Sluiskin finally accepted that Stevens and Van Trump were serious about climbing the mountain and made a desperate effort to dissuade them from going any farther. The two men said Sluiskin gave them an impassioned speech, in which he described the atrocities that awaited the climbers if they ascended the mountain. According to a story that was repeated to friends before it was written down by M.C. George of Oregon and then revised by Stevens in 1915, part of Sluiskin's speech went like this:

Your plan to climb Takhoma is all foolishness. No one can do it and live. A mighty chief dwells upon the summit in a lake of fire. He brooks no intruders. ... And if you should escape these perils and reach the great snowy dome, then a bitterly cold and furious tempest will sweep you off into space like a withered leaf. But if by some miracle you should survive all these perils the mighty demon of Takhoma will surely kill you and throw you into the fiery lake. Don't you go! You make my heart sick when you talk of climbing Takhoma. You will perish if you try to climb Takhoma. You will perish and your people will blame me. Don't go! Don't go!

This version of the story assumes that Indigenous people feared Rainier. As Smith with *Climbers of Color* has pointed out, this idea is likely untrue.

Despite Sluiskin's warnings, Stevens and Van Trump began their ascent on the morning of August 17, 1870. They passed approximately what is now known as Camp Muir at 10,000 feet and gained a notch at the base of what came to be known as Gibraltar Rock. Ascending a very loose, narrow ledge along the rock's south face, they took great care to avoid knocking off large stones that might send them to the glacier 2,000 feet below. After around 500 feet of climbing, they joined the snowfield that led to the summit. Eleven hours had passed by the time they reached the ridge crest, which they named Peak Success (later renamed Point Success). They planted a flag in the "summit" only to realize they had not reached the true highpoint of the mountain.

Accepting that they would be unable to climb to the summit and get back to camp before dark, the climbers resolved to spend the night out. Miraculously they encountered jets of steam coming from vents inside the mountain, and they were able to find relative comfort in a deep cavern. "Its roof was a dome of brilliant green ice with long icicles pendent from it," Stevens wrote in a trip report.

The following morning, Stevens placed the brass plate inscribed with their names near the top, before passing over the true summit, which they named Crater Peak (known today as Columbia Crest).

As the climbers arrived back at camp, Sluiskin, who had given them up for dead, "ran to embrace them with cries of 'Skookum tillicum! Skookum tumtum!' ('Strong men! Brave hearts!')," Molenaar noted in *The Challenge of Rainier*.

A Trip to the Summit

THE "ORIGINAL" ROUTE TAKEN BY Stevens and Van Trump to the summit became known as the Gibraltar Ledges in 1889 when another well-known mountaineer, E.S. Ingraham, named it after the guardian of the Mediterranean Sea. Gibraltar Rock, one of Rainier's largest rock outcroppings, hangs above the Nisqually Ice Cliff on the southeast side of the mountain, nearly 7,000 feet above what is now known as Paradise. Approximately ten parties successfully climbed the "Gib Ledges" between 1883 and 1905, including the conservationist John Muir in 1888.

Muir's ascent was significant in part because of his aptly named and influential essay "An Ascent of Mount Rainier," which drew more interest to the mountain. Furthermore, a member of Muir's ascent party, Arthur Warner, was the first person to bring a camera (more than fifty pounds of gear) to the top of the peak, where he snapped pictures from the summit.

The party of nine included E.S. Ingraham and Van Trump, who was leading the trip and going for his third ascent of the mountain. They traveled first by train from Seattle to Yelm, then by mule and finally by foot, meeting an Indigenous guide, Soo-Too-Lick, along the way. On the fifth day of travel, they eventually made it to Cloud Camp, a bivy spot at 10,000 feet where they spent one night. This spot would later become known as Camp Muir.

The party took a hundred feet of rope, as well as alpenstocks and an axe. They drove steel calks into their shoes after crossing the rocky Gibraltar Ledges to save the cleats from getting dull. In "An Ascent of Mount Rainier," Muir recorded the climb as being slippery, marked by snowless ice and "yawning crevasses, outspread like lines of defense against any attempt to win the summit." The ascent appeared to go off seamlessly, despite the "nerve-trying work" as the party wove through tangled crevasses, crossed snow bridges and crawled around the ends of the largest chasm. At the top, Muir admired the view, which was at one point obscured by a gathering of clouds: "Soon of all the land only the summits of the mountains, St. Helen's [*sic*], Adams, and Hood, were left in sight, forming islands in the sky."

In the decade after Muir saw "islands in the sky" from the summit of Mt. Rainier, he played a key role in establishing a national park around the mountain. As the president of the Sierra Club during its formative years, Muir devoted considerable time to advocating for the preservation of the mountain, from 1893 until 1899. He was a naturalist and avid traveler of some of the country's most beautiful landscapes, and Rainier held a special place in his heart. In "An Ascent of Mount Rainier," Muir described Paradise on the mountain as being "the most luxuriant and the most extravagantly beautiful of all the alpine gardens I ever beheld in all my mountain-top wanderings." He wanted to help protect the mountain and used his clout to do so.

But Muir was not the first person to recommend a national park. James Bryce, who became the British ambassador to the United States, and Karl von Zittel, a German professor, took a side trip to Rainier



while on an expense-free tour of the Northern Pacific Railroad. They were so struck by the mountain that they contributed to a public report in 1883 recommending that a national park be created, saying that they had seen nothing more beautiful in Europe and that they hoped, “at no distant date,” the land would be made into a national park like Yosemite and Yellowstone.

Also in 1883, James Longmire, who had helped Stevens and Van Trump on their first ascent, discovered mineral springs in what is now the southwest corner of the park, six and a half miles east of what would become the busiest entrance. There, he and his wife opened an inn as a type of wellness retreat in 1885. Advertisements in the local Tacoma paper about the restorative powers of the mineral springs attracted people to the resort, which in turn contributed to the growing popularity of Rainier by bringing people to the mountain who may not have otherwise made the trek. The resort served as a starting point for almost every trip to the mountain, since most visitors stayed at Longmire’s hotel.

As visitation to the area increased, so too did interest in natural resources. Mining claims were being staked and the Pacific Forest

Reserve was established in 1893. That same year, the lobbying campaign to create a national park was launched. Parties with many different interests saw the potential of tourism, commercial land use and conservation. In 1899, congressmen were reassured by these lobbying groups that the park wouldn’t cost the government money, and Mt. Rainier National Park was founded.

To Fall in Love with the World Again

AMID THE FLURRY OF INTEREST in Mt. Rainier, a woman from the nearby town of Yelm began pursuing a climb of the peak—before it was common for women to do so. Fay Fuller, a schoolteacher and writer, was inspired by, and filled with admiration for, Van Trump’s climbs of Rainier.

In 1887, Fuller had the chance to go on a summer outing where she climbed to 8,500 feet, just above Paradise. She wanted to continue, but was soon made to return to camp. When the Van Trumps invited her again in 1890, she was more eager than ever to reach the summit. This time, however, she insisted on doing it on her own terms.

[This Page] **The south-southwest aspect of Rainier.** ❶ Kautz Headwall (III, Callis-Davis-Gordon, 1963) ❷ Kautz Glacier (II or III, Fuhrer-Fuhrer-Toll-Myers, 1920) ❸ Fuhrer Finger (II, Fuhrer-Fuhrer-Hazard-Farrer-Hermans, 1920) August V. Kautz almost reached the summit from the Kautz Glacier in July of 1857, followed by a 1913 ascent

reported by an unnamed party. John Scurlock | [Facing Page] **Fay Fuller poses for a photo in her climbing clothes.** “I accomplished what I have always dreamed of and feared impossible,” Fuller remarked in an essay titled “A Trip to the Summit,” published in *Every Sunday* after she climbed Rainier in 1890. Courtesy of the National Park Service

Along with several others, Fuller rode a horse from Yelm to their base camp, spending up to fourteen hours a day in the saddle. From there, she was invited by other climbers from Seattle and Yelm to join them in their summit attempt on the Gibraltar Ledges route starting the next day. From base camp, she carried two blankets with all she needed rolled inside them, along with canteens around her shoulders and an alpenstock in her hand. With charcoal smeared on her face to help protect it from the sun's glare, she and her ascent team spent one night at Cloud Camp (Camp Muir) at 10,000 feet. Her summit day started with her nibbling chocolate instead of eating breakfast and ended in a "heavenly moment" atop the mountain. The ascent wasn't without drama: someone in the party lost their bundle and another got hit by rockfall twice. Meanwhile, Fuller encountered seemingly bottomless bluish-green crevasses large enough to drop a house into, as well as a thin atmosphere that made it harder to breathe and fierce wind that made the climb bitterly cold.

In his book *The Story of Mount Rainier National Park*, Christian Frank Brockman, an early park naturalist, wrote, "Miss Fuller refused assistance from the men at difficult spots and stated that if she could not achieve the goal without their help she would not deserve to reach it." Fuller utilized boys' shoes, as there were no boots available for women. Her alpenstock was made from a curved shovel handle and she wore a dress that was considered immodest at the time.

"After having reached the summit I began to feel sick from cold, exhaustion and sulphur odor, and for some time suffered from a chill and nausea. After vomiting I felt all right and ready to enjoy the night," Fuller wrote in an essay published in 1890, the same year as the climb.

Her strong spirit and athleticism got her up the mountain, making her the first woman known to reach the summit. But it was her elegant writing and compelling prose that influenced others to attempt Rainier and to visit the mountain itself. "All who have the opportunity, and who live in sight of this lofty pinnacle we almost reverence, who have never climbed the mountains, and want to begin life anew might profitably spend a few weeks next summer on its hillside, if they want to fall in love with the world again," she wrote. Her influence on climbing in the region was furthered by her part in founding local climbing clubs.

A Paradise Established

FOLLOWING FAY FULLER'S ASCENT, at the turn of the century more mountaineers made their way to Rainier. They established significant new routes via the Emmons and Winthrop Glaciers on the north side of the peak, the Ingraham Glacier on the east side and the Tahoma Glacier from the mountain's western flanks.



All of this climbing activity was happening at the same time that park infrastructure was improving and growing. Two key players helped pave the way for early visitors and helped attract more climbers to the mountain. James Longmire used the newly discovered mineral springs as the impetus to build the first permanent settlement inside what is now the national park. For his part, Van Trump operated a guide service in the late 1890s and early 1900s from a tent camp known as Indian Henry's Hunting Ground. He also served as the first government ranger within the present park area, what was then known as the Pacific Forest Reserve.

By 1895, E.S. Ingraham had become a well-known mountaineer, having notched several ascents of Rainier. He wrote a booklet that promoted tourism and mountaineering on the peak. It described the draw of visiting the mountain and

reflected a new attitude that it is "un-American to visit other shores when our own country contains so many places of interest." As visitors started to flock to Rainier, the appetite to climb the mountain increased greatly, and the need for accommodations grew.

A tent camp called Camp of the Clouds was established in the late 1800s. In 1910, road construction began in the direction of Paradise. By 1915, visitors were able to drive up to the camp. Road construction marked a vast increase in the number of tourists visiting the park. During this time, Mt. Rainier National Park became the first national park in the country to collect entrance fees and allow personal vehicles.

Development of the ninety-three-mile Wonderland Trail, named as a publicity ploy to attract visitors, began in 1907 and was completed in 1915. The path encircles the mountain and was built to make patrolling and protecting the park's resources easier, but it quickly became a popular lowland route for hiking and camping.

As interest grew, more comfortable accommodations were built. In 1917, the Paradise Inn was established, followed by the Guide House in 1921. These acted as housing for tourists, climbers and summer employees of the Rainier National Park Company.

By 1921, two stone cabins had been built at Camp Muir. Among their many purposes, they have been used as shelters, a base camp, a cook shack, a search and rescue base and a ranger station. The first was designed by a member of The Mountaineers, Carl F. Gould, and was built in 1916. The second, called the Public Shelter, was built in 1921. The stage was set for climbers to reach higher elevations on the mountain more easily, and for more of them to summit. "The initial explorations from the west, which followed the Nisqually valley to the mountain's base, and the subsequent development of trails and roads into the south side of the park, made Paradise not only the center of Northwest mountaineering but the mecca for climbers from Europe who sought glacier-crowned peaks in America," Mole-naar wrote.



Votes for Women

THE DEVELOPMENT OF REGIONAL CLIMBING clubs—The Mountaineers, the Washington Alpine Club and the Mazamas—played a significant role in increasing climbing activity on Rainier. Though the Mazamas were based in Portland, Oregon, they first held an annual trip to Rainier to attempt a summit climb in 1897, three years after the club's inception. During this climb, Fay Fuller, then vice president of the Mazamas, summited, along with the founder of the club, William Steel. The ascent ended in tragedy, however, when one of its members died on the descent.

In 1909, three years after The Mountaineers was established, a group of members went on an outing to Mt. Rainier. The trip happened shortly after the National American Woman Suffrage Association Convention in Seattle. Among the club members who summited was suffragist, mountaineer and physician Cora Smith Eaton. On top, they planted a small pennant bearing the motto “Votes for Women.” It was this inclusive approach to mountaineering that helped inspire more women to attempt the mountain.

A few years later, in 1912, a group of Mountaineers summited Rainier and wrote about it eloquently in an early issue of *The Mountaineer*, the annual publication of the club (until 1994). At one point on the climb, E.M. Hack, who penned the piece, let his mind wander during the struggle of the day: “The writer was left alone for a few minutes beneath a peculiarly formed impending mass of snow and ice, which imagination easily likened to the jaws of some vast prehistoric monster suddenly frozen by tremendous climatic changes, even in the act of devouring its prey.” Hack described boiling beef tea over a steam vent at 14,000 feet and falling into a “comfortably warm” and “spooky” cavern.

In 1916, a controversial figure named Anna Louise Strong co-founded the Washington Alpine Club (at the time known as Co-operative Campers). That year, Strong helped establish five summer camps on Rainier. By offering training and guides for the climb, camps like these got more mountaineers of less experience to the summit of the mountain.

Today, Strong is remembered with some skepticism. “Anna Louise

Strong was an incredible woman with a fanaticism that led her off the deep end,” said WAC member Jodie Eilers. “There is both pride for a lot of what she accomplished in the Seattle area, and a justified hesitation to wave the flag for her as a founder because she became very radical and supported communist movements in the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China.” Beyond its radical roots, the club has served an important role in helping climbers both reach the top of Rainier and train for other mountaineering objectives throughout the state and around the world.

The Role of Skiing

IN THE SUMMER OF 2014, I skinned up a well-worn trough on the Muir Snowfield with Kristy and several of our friends. It felt like everyone in Seattle was out on this warm sunny day. As I pointed my skis south, after a nourishing lunch break at the shelter, the views of Mt. Adams and Mt. St. Helens popped out, as if from a movie screen. I couldn’t have been more thrilled to be skiing in this iconic place, far from my roots back East. Temperatures hovered in the high seventies and a party-like atmosphere reverberated around me. But a century ago, the crowds were just starting to arrive on the slopes of Mt. Rainier.

“Skiing on Rainier provided a setting that helped unify the Northwest outdoor community in a way that transcended the individual clubs established in previous years. It popularized mountain recreation beyond the club milieu,” said Lowell Skoog, a ski historian from Seattle.

In 1917, the Northwestern Ski Club held a ski jumping contest at Paradise. The winner was Olga Bolstad, a Norwegian woman in her twenties who had moved to Seattle a few years earlier. The tournament became an annual event, bringing more people to the mountain and marking a new era of recreation and exploration.

In 1920, a party of guides including Hans and Heinie Fuhrer, Peyton Farrer, Thomas Hermans and Joseph T. Hazard established “the shortest distance between two points,” according to *The Challenge of Rainier*. Their route crossed the Nisqually Glacier from Paradise, heading directly up a long snow-filled couloir leading to the summit

dome. While they completed the trip on foot, the route, called the Fuhrer Finger, is now a modern-day skier's dream, featured in the book *Fifty Classic Ski Descents of North America*. A continuous ski descent of 10,400 feet is possible from the summit to the Nisqually Bridge below Paradise, making it one of the longest continuous ski lines in North America.

While skiing on Mt. Rainier was growing locally, it was also attracting talent from afar. Otto Lang, a well-known Austrian ski instructor, started a ski school on the mountain that introduced the most up-to-date ski techniques from Europe to the Northwest. This continued interest in the peak as a ski destination drew more development. The Paradise Lodge was built in 1928, in part in the hopes of attracting more winter business, such as skiing, while meeting a need for more overnight accommodations.

Rainier seemed to be on track to remain an important downhill ski destination for years to come. The National Downhill and Slalom Championships and Olympic team tryouts for the 1936 Winter Olympics were held at Paradise in 1935. Another popular event took place from 1934 to 1942 and 1947 to 1948: skiers ascended from the Paradise Lodge to Camp Muir, then raced down in what became known as the Silver Skis Race, "descending more than 4,400 vertical feet in about three miles at speeds sometimes reaching more than 60 m.p.h.," ski historian John W. Lundin wrote in a 2019 essay. "It was a rough virtually uncontrolled downhill course in a dramatic setting. Racers faced conditions ranging from glacier ice to slush in a race that quickly achieved legendary status."

Soon access to skiing became even easier, when tow ropes were installed at Paradise in the late 1940s. They remained in place until the mid-1970s. There were grand plans to install an aerial tramway and turn Paradise into a skiing destination in the 1950s, led by the Automobile Club of Washington with support from Washington Governor Arthur Langlie.

Ultimately, National Park Service (NPS) Director Conrad Wirth opposed the tram. Once plans for the tramway were shut down, efforts were redirected toward developing a ski resort nearby instead. Crystal Mountain ski area opened in 1962 just northeast of Rainier and drew traffic away from Paradise. The future of skiing on Rainier then turned to the backcountry, the precedent for which had been set more than a decade earlier, when Kermit Bengtson, Dave Roberts, Cliff Schmidtke and Charles E. Welsh made the first ski descent via the Emmons Glacier in 1948.

Ridge Routes Established

RIGHT ALONGSIDE THE DEVELOPMENT OF skiing, climbers were exploring technical routes high on the mountain. In the early 1900s, new infrastructure aided the exploration of hard routes from different aspects. The Westside Road was built in the mid-1930s, which created a loop through the park. Soon, it was easier to attempt climbing Rainier's western side via the Tahoma and South Tahoma Glaciers.

[Facing Page, Left] Climbers from the Mazamas pose on Pinnacle Peak in 1897. "It was a cloudy day and only for a moment was the veil withdrawn giving us a fleeting view of Rainier's summit," Edward T. Parsons wrote in the 1900 *Mazama Annual*. "It was a glorious practice climb for the more serious work to come." Mazama Library & Historical

Similarly, the opening of a road to Mowich Lake in 1933 brought exploration and interest to the northwest side of the mountain, leading climbers to Ptarmigan Ridge.

By 1935, several parties had tried and failed to climb the feature. But that year, the weekend after Labor Day, Wolf Bauer and Jack Hossack packed their bags with enough food and gear for four days and confidently left for Ptarmigan Ridge. "Never had this writer felt so certain of success before a difficult climb," Bauer later wrote in *The Mountaineer*.

After sleeping for four hours on the side of the mountain, Bauer and Hossack navigated "crumbly" rock on the west side of Ptarmigan Ridge by flashlight before crossing a bergschrund and assessing the terrain. After determining their route, the pair set off a flare to communicate with their ground crew (Harriet Woodward) that they'd be continuing upward. "This signal carried with it the further significance of a hot meal awaiting us at Camp Muir should we get there that evening," Bauer wrote. The pair then began chopping steps into "steep glare ice" as they slowly worked their way up the ridge. "Because anchoring was almost wholly confined to body and ice axe belays, large footholds and frequent knee and handholds had to be chiseled," Bauer recalled of the challenging terrain. The team faced "furious bombardment from whole swarms of hissing rock and ice fragments." They later utilized "deep ice belays" and chopped through seracs as they climbed the ridge. That night, though, they did not enjoy a hot meal at Camp Muir with Harriet as they'd hoped. Instead, after finally making it through the step-cutting and glare ice, they ate hot pea soup and slept near Liberty Cap. The rest of the climb was a breeze. "With a cheery yodel we descended under a lazy afternoon sun down into the green valley which, after the cold deadness of the upper ice world, seemed truly a paradise valley to our hungry eyes," Bauer wrote.

Climbers quickly turned their eyes to Liberty Ridge. Rising 5,500 feet from the Carbon Glacier, the ridge presents exposure, steep ice, complex route finding and hazardous rockfall. Three weeks after the first ascent of Ptarmigan Ridge, Ome Daiber, Arnie Campbell and Jim Borrow set off for what would become one of the most famous routes on the mountain.

One evening after a Mountaineers meeting, Daiber suggested an attempt at Liberty Ridge to Borrow, who initially took the suggestion as a joke. Within a week they had chosen Campbell as a third member, completed some reconnaissance of the route and set out for the climb. They left the car at the end of the Carbon River Road at 2:45 p.m. and made camp that evening at 6,000 feet on Curtis Ridge. Borrow wrote in *The Mountaineer*: "The sky was like indigo in which myriads of stars appeared and with the mountain clearly silhouetted against the dark curtain of sky, the ice and snow added a ghostlike appearance to the wall." Once on Liberty Ridge, the trio faced slopes of seventy degrees or more, often demanding they cut steps or climb loose rock. "At one point a piece of the ridge gave way under Ome as he leaped to the side and safety," wrote Molenaar in *The Challenge of Rainier*.

Collections | [Facing Page, Middle] Olga Bolstad wins the first ski tournament on Rainier in 1917. Washington State Historical Society | [Facing Page, Right] Jacques Bergues and Jacques and Jean Landry (left to right, right front row) made the first winter ascent of Rainier with Charles Perryman in 1922. Northwest Room at the Tacoma Public Library



Just when the party thought they were off the ridge to Liberty Cap, they encountered a huge overhanging crevasse. Unable to ascend the crevasse easily because of its height, Campbell and Borrow lifted Daiber on his feet above their heads. “Ome leaned out and jumped as we shoved, stuck his axe in the easy slope above, and hung on,” Campbell wrote in his diary, as quoted by Molenaar. Once they reached Liberty Cap, the team took a break and treated themselves to preserved apples before beginning their descent amid bitterly cold temperatures. They stopped again and bivouacked, watching the lights from the aurora borealis dance overhead. When light returned, the team scraped the ice off their boots and carried on back down the mountain.

Simply to Be Doing Something

IN 2014, DURING MY FIRST summer in Seattle housed in my friend’s backyard shack, I landed a job as a gear manager at Mountain Madness. The climbing guide service was made famous by its co-founder Scott Fischer, who died during the 1996 tragedy on Mt. Everest that was documented in Jon Krakauer’s book *Into Thin Air*. My newfound goal of becoming a guide seemed glamorous at the time. I pictured myself stoically leading clients up challenging rock climbs on iconic peaks in Washington. Instead, I was faced with the stink of cleaning out wet tents and drying out used boots. The work only fueled my appetite for tackling glacier climbs and technical rock routes



[Facing Page] **The Willis Wall, Liberty Ridge and Ptarmigan Ridge on the north aspect of Mt. Rainier.** John Scurlock | [This Page, Left] **Ome Daiber ties in on Wapowety Cleaver.** Daiber co-founded Mountain Rescue Patrol, which would later become Mountain Rescue Council, with Wolf Bauer and others in 1939. Daiber was also known for his innovative gear creations, including a two-legged sleeping bag called the Penguin. Courtesy of Lowell Skoog | [This Page, Right] **Bauer on the first ascent of Ptarmigan Ridge, 1935.** Jack Hossack

throughout the Cascades. Armed with basic mountaineering skills, and after some personal trial and error, I set out to climb the Disappointment Cleaver, often referred to as the “DC.”

I roped up with a buddy who had never set foot on a glacier. At Camp Muir, we squeezed our yellow, single-wall, two-person tent in next to dozens of others. We shared sips of whiskey before I fell into a fitful sleep.

We set out for the summit at 5 a.m., just as the sun was starting to send red and orange hues over the horizon above Little Tahoma. I remember crossing over a gaping crevasse on the Ingraham Glacier, my crampons skating and sliding as I searched for purchase. Despite being connected to a lifeline, I thought, *I don't know what I'd do if I fell here.* After weaving through the cleaver itself, a dirt path trod by thousands of climbers each summer, we ascended the final ramp to Columbia Crest. The snow beneath me reflected the solar radiation of the morning sun onto my face as I followed the well-worn track. *Climbing mountains is easy*, I thought innocently.

On top of the mountain summit, we cracked open celebratory tall boys of Rainier beer, but my head pounded and my ego was put in check as I eagerly anticipated going down. I started coming to terms with the fact that I may not be built for surviving at high elevation.

Like most people who climb Rainier, I was able to ascend the Disappointment Cleaver without needing much technical skill, thanks to the route being established and maintained each season by climbing guides. Today, 75 percent of all summit attempts are made via the DC, and it can become quite crowded during the summer. Despite its popularity, the route's history is murky and it's unclear who first climbed it.

Up until 1936, the Gibraltar Ledges route was the most popular way to the summit. Following a rock avalanche that wiped out much of the ascent trail across the Gibraltar face, the route began to lose popularity due to the hazardous conditions.

Starting in the late 1950s, the Disappointment Cleaver–Ingraham

Glacier route became the line of choice, as it surpasses Gibraltar Rock to the east and provides a safer route up the mountain. While it's unclear who the first ascensionist was, there are records of what were likely early ascents of the route. In one story, in 1885 or 1886, A.L. Brown, along with a hunting party of Yakama Indians, decided to take a reprieve from hunting to climb the mountain. They brought their horses all the way up to 8,500 feet, then continued on the Ingraham Glacier. From there, they climbed along a ledge, presumably the Disappointment Cleaver, and then returned to the glacier. They turned around shortly after for no apparent reason. In the 1920 issue of *The Mountaineer*, Brown suggested that he really didn't care about climbing the mountain at all: “You will note from the foregoing that as far as I was concerned this mountain climb was just a lark with me. I was out with a crowd simply to be doing something. It has never occurred to me as being of any historical value, and it is reasonably certain that the Indians never gave it a thought.” By the early 1940s, the DC route was being used more regularly, and was the route chosen by the 87th Mountain Infantry Regiment, which was stationed at Mt. Rainier to practice winter troop movements during World War II.

The Mountain in Wartime

IN THE WINTER OF 1942, months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor during World War II, the United States sent troops to the Cascades. The US Army used Rainier as their first foray into soldiering and skiing as they realized the fight in Europe would likely require specialized mountain units. Rainier was chosen for training grounds because, according to the National Park Service, its terrain and weather were reminiscent of the European Alps, especially in the winter.

From mid-February to late May 1942, 350 officers and enlisted men from the 1st Battalion, 87th Mountain Infantry Regiment, began training on Rainier to learn new winter travel and survival techniques. In his essay “100 Years in ‘Wonderland,’” Lowell Skoog described how the soldiers composed songs to celebrate their duties at Paradise. The “Ballad of Sven” went like this:

*Oh give me skis and some poles and klister
And let me ski way up on Alta Vista [a
small peak near the Muir Snowfield].
You can take your snowshoes and burn them, sister
And everywhere I go you'll hear my war whoop.*

1988–1995

Mt. Rainier: The Training and the Test

CHRIS WEIDNER

THREE DAYS AFTER MY FOURTEENTH birthday I staggered to Mt. Rainier's crater rim and collapsed. I couldn't believe I'd made it that far. Sweat soaked my polypropylene shirt, buried beneath a long-sleeve wool layer that was too much of a hassle to remove while walking as a rope team.

My dad had begun the summit climb with us early that morning of August 31, 1988; it would be the debut and finale of his climbing career. He had made it to 12,500 feet—a respectable effort having come from sea level the day before—but he turned around, exhausted. Before we parted ways he handed me his father's gold watch, which gleamed in the light of my clunky REI headlamp (powered by four C batteries in a pack connected to the lamp with a long cord). "Bury this at the summit, for your grandfather," he told me.

I'd never met my grandfather. He died of a heart attack at fifty-six years old, long before I was born. It was the fate of all Weidner men, none of whom had lived to see their grandchildren, for many generations.

Phil Ershler, a guide for Rainier Mountaineering, Inc. (RMI), led my rope team. He was a prolific high-altitude expedition climber who, four years earlier, had become the first American to summit Everest by its North Face. In my young eyes he was a demigod.

"Get up!" Ershler yelled at me as I lay in exactly the same position I'd collapsed in minutes earlier. "We're going to the summit!"

"Aren't we at the summit?" I asked sheepishly, as I watched others embrace and congratulate one another.

"The true summit is across the crater," he said. "Let's go!"

Though I carried my grandfather's watch, I decided not to bury it. My strong desire to honor my dad's request was overruled by my aversion to intentional littering, especially in a place as hallowed as I deemed this mountaintop.

The mountain's changing conditions, technical terrain and unpredictable weather make it a far more serious objective than the Lower 48's other "Fourteeners." It's no wonder Mt. Rainier has been an invaluable training ground for

generations of mountaineers who plan to climb higher and harder.

Climbers like Ed Viesturs, the first American to climb all fourteen 8000-meter peaks, climbed extensively on Mt. Rainier. The mountain played an important role in the early careers of other famous alpinists such as Mark Twight, Conrad Anker, Willie Benegas, Melissa Arnot Reid, Willi Unsoeld, Lou and Jim Whittaker and countless others over the years.

For me, Mt. Rainier was both the training and the test. My second time to the summit was more than five years after my first, in January 1994. In the interim I'd climbed dozens of Cascade summits, some in winter, including my first new route: the ca. 1,200-foot north face of Mt. Kent. I'd taken a five-day winter climbing seminar on Mt. Rainier through RMI and, with them, had climbed to the summit ridge of Denali as soon as I'd graduated high school.

Despite my preparation, my friend Jack and I made several glaring errors when we climbed the Gibraltar Ledges that winter. Strong winds blew surface snow in such a fury that we couldn't see more than a few feet ahead of us during the descent, forcing us to bivvy. We had foolishly decided to "go light," so we had no shelter, bivvy sack, shovel or stove. For nearly ten hours we endured a terrible bivouac at 13,000 feet where we dared not close our eyes for long, fearing that we wouldn't wake up. We were lucky to make it down alive.

By the time I climbed Mt. Rainier a fourth time, up the Emmons Glacier in 1997, I was the one leading a rope team as an apprentice guide. By the summer of 2000 I had logged eleven ascents to the true summit, most of them guiding.

But my most memorable, and indeed most life-changing, ascent of Mt. Rainier was my third, which, I'm embarrassed to admit, is also a survival story.

Eighteen months after my harrowing winter bivouac at 13,000 feet, my friend Jeff and I—then twenty-four and twenty years old—left Seattle to squeeze in an ascent of the classic Liberty Ridge before a predicted storm blew in.

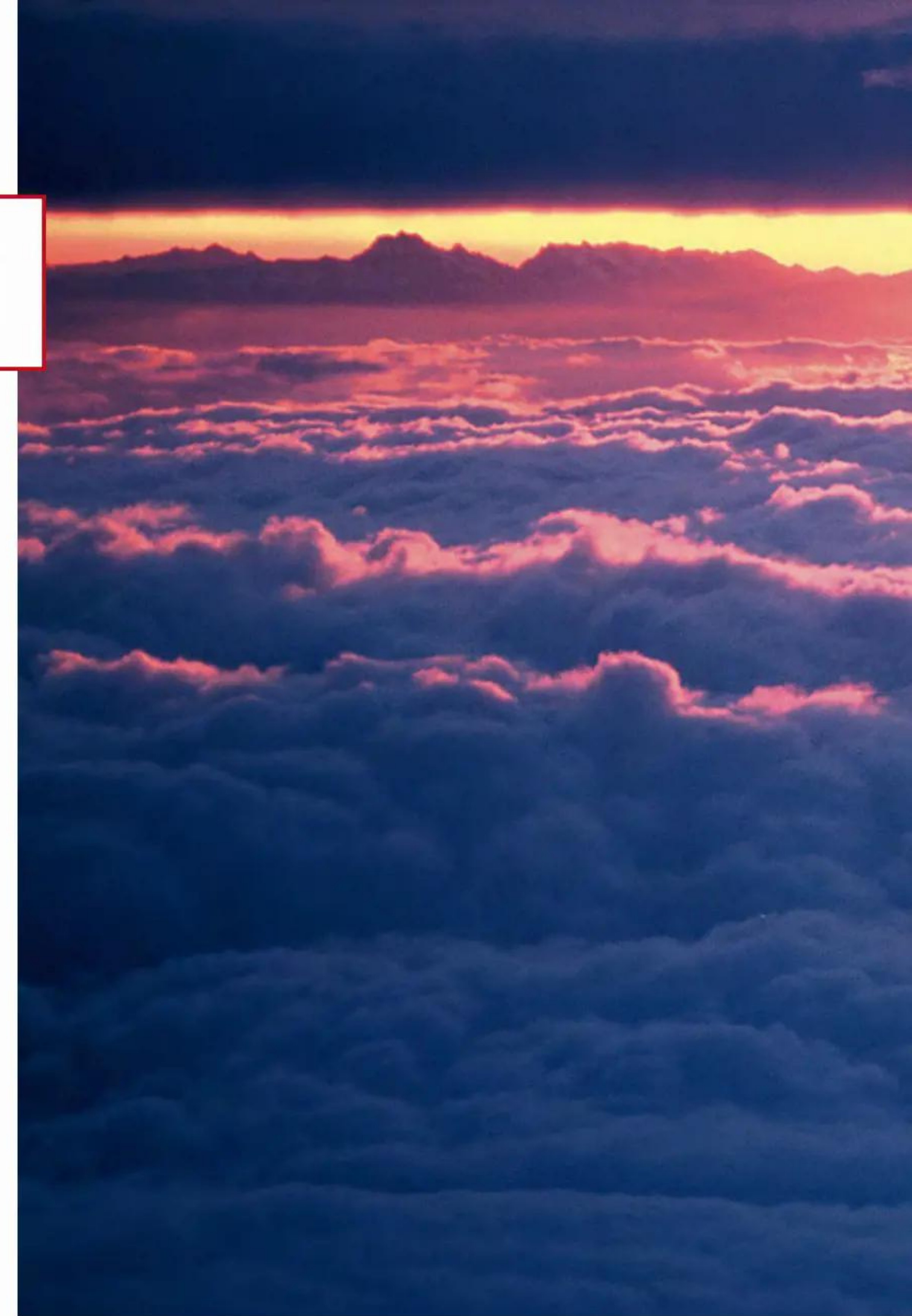
On the afternoon of June 2, 1995, Jeff and I

reached the trailhead. We packed, put on sunscreen and did a quick gear check. That's when we realized we had forgotten the pump for our stove. So we drove two hours back to my apartment in Seattle, grabbed a pump, then drove another two hours back. By the time we started walking it was after 8 p.m., yet we savored the quiet hike under a clear, star-filled sky.

After a six-hour sleep we awoke at 5 a.m. in Glacier Basin to a crisp, cloudless day. The sun had just crested the horizon by the time we'd packed up and continued the approach over St. Elmo Pass. The soft morning light reflecting off the snow turned brighter, harsher, as we crossed the Winthrop and Carbon Glaciers to reach the base of Liberty Ridge. It was so warm that we had to posthole up 2,000 feet of steep, soft snow to reach our next camp at Thumb Rock, about half-way up the ridge. We'd gained 4,700 feet since morning.

By the evening of June 3, the storm we were trying to outrun was supposed to arrive in twenty-four hours—plenty of time for us to finish the climb and descend before it hit. We feasted on cookies, dried mango, Fig Newtons, bagels with cheese and smoked salmon, and pasta. I wrote in my journal, "Low cumulus abound, which don't matter, but the cirrus clouds are forming."

At 2 a.m. a light cloud layer obscured most of





[Photo] **A storm approaches as Chris Weidner and Jeff Hashimoto climb Liberty Ridge in 1995.** Chris Weidner

the stars. We soon left Thumb Rock unroped. A steep, ten-foot section of water ice provided an early challenge, followed by hundreds of feet of forty-five-degree snow. I switched off my headlamp and tuned in to the audible rhythm of kicking crampons and heavy breathing. Four hours into the day, still unroped, we had ascended most of the route. But as we gained elevation the clouds grew dark and thick, the wind picked up and it began to snow.

The storm had materialized half a day earlier than predicted. In retrospect, retreat may have been the best option, even from this high up. But at the time Jeff and I felt committed, like it would be easier to finish up and over the mountain.

Above the Black Pyramid, we roped up for running belays on steep snow and occasional water ice, placing pickets and ice screws along the way. My pants and turtleneck grew damp and I started to shiver. The snow fell harder, making it difficult to see where we were. I led us to a narrow, exposed ridge of rock and snow where we dug a spot for the tent at about 13,500 feet—just 600 feet below Liberty Cap, Mt. Rainier's north summit. It was 9:30 a.m. The waiting had begun.

By five o'clock that evening we tried to sleep but were ready to leave whenever visibility returned. But heavy snow continued for hours throughout the night, confirming our fear of

avalanche conditions. On the morning of June 5 we broke down the tent and packed up, but before we could leave our vulnerable perch, extreme wind, cold and blowing snow forced us to reestablish our camp. We had planned to be at the car the night before; I was certain our friends and families had begun to worry.

Snow blasted through the tent zippers as our nylon shell shuddered constantly in the terrifying wind. We shivered inside, huddled close. One oatmeal packet each would have to suffice. We had no idea how long we would have to wait so we had begun rationing food. By 6:30 p.m. we had been tent bound for more than thirty hours.

June 6 proved intensely frightening. At midnight a brief lull in the wind beckoned us to resume climbing through the storm. If we were going to get off the mountain we had to move whenever possible. We climbed steep ice with goggles, dim headlamps and unwieldy packs. Jeff led three pitches while I froze at the belay, moaning uncontrollably.

It took us more than five hours to navigate the remaining ice and snow to the summit of Liberty Cap, battling ferocious wind. On top, powerful gusts knocked us off our feet. Unable to walk safely, we set up our tent again, only this time we were even more exposed. The next twenty-four hours on Liberty Cap were full of fear and

thoughts of my girlfriend, Julie.

After a few minutes inside we willed ourselves out again to build a snow wall. It helped for a little while, but then we were jolted awake by an awful roar—the strongest wind I'd ever experienced. Ninety minutes went by where it felt like the tent would either collapse or get blown away with us in it. Jeff and I propped our shovels against the inside of the tent, which seemed to help since one of the poles had broken. By now my journal had morphed into something of a goodbye letter: "I don't want to die now Julie—I want to hold you again, warm and safe. I have never been more scared for my life." I wondered: Would I be another Weidner male never to meet (or have, for that matter) a grandchild?

Meanwhile, our disappearance had made the news, in print and on TV. A huge rescue operation had been set in motion, with ground crews and a helicopter on standby for a lull in the storm.

Hours passed. Night came and went. At 5 a.m. the wind had decreased just enough to convince us to don our ice-caked clothes and pack up. Jeff had previously climbed the Emmons Glacier, our descent route, so he led us down through a whiteout. We didn't get very far before the gale knocked us down again. We made camp and built a robust wall of snow blocks surrounding the tent. I shivered next to Jeff, but at least it finally seemed calm.

At this point we were overdue by two and a half days. To the horror of friends and family, local news organizations ran headlines about losing hope for the two men lost on Mt. Rainier. Unaware of the media, we still weren't surprised to hear the thunderous propellers of a Chinook helicopter somewhere out there, searching for us. The sound buoyed our spirits—if the chopper was flying, the weather had to be clear below. With renewed energy we packed up quickly and stumbled downhill, skirting large crevasses. Soon, I became warm for the first time in three days.

What a hopeful, magical feeling it was to break through the freezing, hellish cloud and wind into a bright and benevolent world of brilliant sunshine. Jeff and I whooped with laughter and relief. *We are going to live!*

[Photo] **The northwest aspect and the Mowich Face. Dee Molenaar wrote it was "among the more attractive of the new challenges" in the 1950s.** John Scurlock

During the war, while the Army brought soldiers to the mountain, the number of recreationists entering the park fell dramatically. There were fewer resources available to tourists, and many people who once spent their days chopping steps up icy slopes had been drafted into the service. Still, organizations like The Mountaineers worked to keep themselves afloat. In the 1942 issue of *The Mountaineer*, George McGowan wrote that the club was facing “its greatest test in its thirty-six years of ... existence.” He continued: “With the curtailment of activities and loss of members to the service, a very heavy burden will fall on those still at home. All should make a genuine effort to carry this load.”

In the years after the war, there was a major increase in climbers returning to Mt. Rainier, as well as throughout the nation. The development and testing of climbing gear such as nylon ropes, and the improvement of pitons and carabiners during the war, made climbing safer for rock and snow routes. And as people once again had more leisure time and resources, Rainier went from being virtually shut down for recreation to experiencing a record number of visitors up to that point in 1945.

Mid-Century Exploration

THOUGH PERHAPS THE MOST FAMOUS ridge on Rainier had been climbed in the 1930s, two decades later, by the mid-1950s, there was still plenty of exploration to be done; another of the mountain’s prominent ridges still had no established routes. The mid-twentieth century was an exciting period of exploration on the mountain—with improved gear and enthusiastic climbers. Among them was Dee Molenaar, who first visited the mountain in 1939 and later became a guide, park ranger and general authority on Rainier’s climbing history. In the late 1950s, he assumed that there were few major challenges left on the mountain. Yet, years later, he wrote in *The Challenge of Rainier*, “Despite periodic pronouncements that all worthwhile ridges, headwalls, glaciers, ice slopes, and snow fingers now have been climbed, it is apparent that new challenges will continue to crop up to stimulate those with a yen for adventure.” Time after time, the unlikely was proved possible. Such was the case on Curtis Ridge in 1957.

Fred Beckey was perhaps the most influential climber and pre-eminent first ascensionist in the history of Northwest climbing. He had deep respect for the dangers of Curtis Ridge, the largest of Rainier’s northern ridges, marked by constant rockfall from rotten cliffs that turned back many early attempts. Its broad base rises from the Carbon Glacier, sharpening to a narrow crest at 10,300 feet on the north side of the mountain. “Of all the major routes on Rainier, Curtis Ridge probably has the highest potential for rockfall. With this in mind, speed is of the essence,” Beckey wrote in volume one of his *Cascade Alpine Guide* series.

Though Rainier was never the primary focus of his attention, Beckey did spend quite a bit of time there. He made the first ascent of the Mowich Face via the Edmunds Headwall with Don Claunch, Tom Hornbein, John Rupley and Herb Staley in 1957, and in 1963 he added another new route to the mountain with Steve Marts, on



the South Tahoma Headwall. In 1957, however, it was not Beckey but a couple of climbers from central Washington—Marcel Schuster and Gene Prater—who finally found a way up Curtis Ridge.

Schuster, a former prisoner of war in World War II and a German immigrant, was a leader for many climbers from the Yakima area. He taught Prater how to frontpoint. The climbers knew that the key to unlocking Curtis Ridge was to wait for a weather window that wasn’t too stormy, but with temperatures that were cold enough, and perhaps with enough snow, to hold together the loose terrain on the route.

Prater and Bob McCall (a member of the support team) scouted the approach and found a rappel off the Carbon Glacier. After scouting out their path, and seeing no sign of recent rockfall, Prater and Schuster carried on. A report in the 1958 *American Alpine Journal* described how “recent new snow had become well consolidated and offered a solid footing and a binding material to hold the rocks in place.” It was Schuster who stood on Prater’s shoulders to ascend a high step of lava at 10,500 feet, then Prater led up, using a stirrup that he attached to an old piton and carabiner, left behind on a previous attempt, to gain the second crux of the climb. After he belayed Schuster, who was carrying the two climbers’ packs, they reached easier terrain leading to the summit. The shoulder stand was a signature



move of Beckey's, a technique he used many times to surmount difficult sections of rock in the Cascades.

Following Schuster and Prater's success, climbers turned their attention to the most dangerous face on the mountain, the infamous Willis Wall.

The Last Hard Routes

THE DARKEST, MOST IMPOSING AND most hazardous face on Mt. Rainier rises nearly 4,000 feet up the north side of the peak. Even Bailey Willis, a geologist who spent years charting Rainier's north side in the late 1800s, and after whom the feature was named, was skeptical that anyone could climb it. "As he watched what seemed like constant avalanches of ice and rock rain down the face's sheer slopes, Willis was convinced no climber who attempted the wall would ever live to tell about it," wrote Skip Card in a short essay published in Mike Gauthier's *Mount Rainier: A Climbing Guide*. The Willis Wall is plagued by rock- and icefall, and it features technical climbing with little protection and little to no shelter. Guidebooks warn climbers to approach the wall with extra caution and respect.

Up until the 1960s, the National Park Service restricted climbers

from attempting the wall, considering it suicidal. By the 1960s, though, with many of the other major features having been climbed, there was a growing interest in tackling the unthinkable, and the NPS was slowly becoming more lenient on climbing permits. Initially, wrote Molenaar in *The Challenge of Rainier*, "several parties approached the huge bergschrund at the base of the wall in early-morning darkness but retreated from the menacing sound of ice and rockfall and, for some, spurred by thoughts of wife and kids."

The first climb of the Willis Wall was fraught with controversy. In June of 1961, a party of seven, including Charlie Bell, scouted out the feature without obtaining approval from park rangers. Everyone bailed when bad weather rolled in—except Bell. He ascended what he dubbed the Damocles Rib (West Rib) solo, albeit without a camera to prove his historic ascent. In a third-person account that is included in *The Challenge of Rainier*, Bell described his experience on the wall as both harrowing and unfolding surprisingly without a hitch. "Visible now and then directly above was Damocles itself, an enormous, apparently overhanging serac, somewhat dubiously attached to the ice cliffs directly above the rib," Bell wrote. Despite the potential for catastrophic icefall and avalanches, Bell did not experience anything breaking off the ice cliffs, though he saw "four

[This Page] **Dave Mahre traverses snow and ice during a 1963 ascent of the Willis Wall with Jim Wickwire, Fred Dunham and Don Anderson. The climb, which included a traverse from the wall's East Rib to the Central Rib, marked the first time anyone had climbed the entirety of the feature, through the ice cliff towering over the top.** Jim Wickwire | [Facing Page] **An avalanche roars down Liberty Wall, between Ptarmigan and Liberty Ridges, in April 2018.** Jason Hummel

small avalanches far to the east.”

In response to the doubters, Bell accompanied a party of climbers the following week who set out to investigate his supposed new route. As Molenaar recounted in *The Challenge of Rainier*, the other climbers in the group found Bell's ability to point out his path “vague” and therefore refused to give him credit for the ascent. After the entire party abandoned the climb, Bell headed back home to the eastern part of the United States where he was from. He returned the next summer to climb the wall again, this time taking many photos while on the route, to prove his first ascent. There is no doubt Bell made an early ascent of the Willis Wall, yet the lack of photographic evidence and the solo nature of his first climb have kept his original ascent from being considered the definitive first on the wall. (Though, according to Molenaar, there is “no real basis for doubting his claim.”)

The more recognized first ascent was completed by Ed Cooper and Mike Swayne in 1962, but it was also done without obtaining approval from park rangers. Cooper and Swayne had a close call at their bivouac after sunset, when an avalanche roared down a chute on the wall. They outran the slide, unroped and without shoes on, as the avalanche reached the same level as their bivy spot, narrowly missing them. Even though they were shaken, they started their climb at midnight, a decision that seems to contradict what Cooper later wrote to Molenaar, saying that “the climb was not worth the ultimate sacrifice.” The climbers didn't face any great difficulties, though precise climbing was important to prevent rockfall from taking out the party. After surmounting a sixty-degree boulderfield, they soon stood at the top of Curtis Ridge, after breaking off to the left of the Willis Wall.

In the next decade several more climbers, including Jim Wickwire, ventured up the imposing face. Wickwire, a climber from Ephrata, was among the first climbers to ascend the entirety of the Willis Wall—including a 250-foot ice cliff. A year after Cooper and Swayne's climb, which skirted the ice cliff to the left, Dave Mahre, Wickwire, Fred Dunham and Don Anderson found a way through a break in the ice at the top of the wall. Mahre had recruited the other climbers after several years spent studying a potential route.

Wickwire returned for the first winter ascent in 1970. That February, nine days after assessing their intended route from the air,



Wickwire and Alex Bertulis set out for the mountain. They spent their first night camped on a snow platform at 3,700 feet at the terminus of the Carbon Glacier. “We were without a tent or down parkas, relying on a two-man bivouac sack and the probability of suitable snow-cave sites,” Wickwire recalled in the 1971 *American Alpine Journal*. The next day, the pair snowshoed another 5,000 feet upward to the base of Liberty Ridge. Once the wall was in view, they observed that the snow conditions looked ideal.

The route was largely uneventful until the climbers reached the top of a snow dome that forced them to rely on hope in addition to skill to keep them safe. “The 250-foot-high ice cliff loomed directly above, overpowering as it seemed suspended in its verticality. No longer would the buttress provide any protection from ice avalanches, and for the remainder of the climb we were virtually at the mercy of whatever forces held the ice cliff together,” Wickwire wrote.

The wind strengthened as Wickwire and Bertulis continued upward, past ice avalanches, icy rockbands and “a bulge of 60° ice just a few feet from the ice cliff.” With poor visibility and blowing snow, the climbers bivied in a spot only big enough to sit down. It was anything but restful. During the night, the two listened to more ice avalanches crashing down the mountain—one of which tumbled through the path the climbers had taken earlier that day. At daybreak, they continued to Liberty Ridge. The pair named their new route Brumal Buttress.

The following year, Wickwire and another partner, Ed Boulton, set their sights on the full Central Rib of the Willis Wall. As they began their climb, incoming clouds marked the first sign of danger. Then the climbers were hit with small bits of ice from a nearby ice avalanche. Conditions quickly worsened, and the pair found themselves navigating in whiteout conditions as snow began to fall. After a few close calls amid a strengthening storm, Wickwire and Boulton decided to stop climbing. They spent an unplanned bivy on the wall





at around 13,000 feet, taking shelter in a small cave or moat while avalanches came down around them during the night. The terrible weather did not relent the next day, and the climbers were forced to plow up through waist-deep snow. They eventually reached a wide snow ramp positioned between the two largest ice cliffs on the wall. Despite slow progress, they reached Liberty Cap that same day. As the storm raged on, the pair spent a night at the top. They dug a snow cave that became like a tomb when high winds closed the entrance with snow. Their bivy sack ripped in the wind as the two tried to keep warm, and Wickwire feared the worst. “Each new blast of wind drove particles of snow deeper into our faces. No matter how we drew the bivouac cloth around us, we could not escape the storm; I thought we might die,” Wickwire recalled in *Addicted to Danger*. In the early hours of the morning, Wickwire and Boulton thought they had a weather window, but the storm quickly picked up again; they waited it out, wrapped in their torn bivy sack and using Wickwire’s backpack as a seat. On day five, they were able to escape down the Emmons Glacier to Camp Schurman, where they climbed through a window of a cabin to wait out the storm, which

continued for two more days. When they finally made it out after seven days, they learned of a search and rescue that was underway. Wickwire credits that epic with helping prepare him for surviving another harrowing experience seven years later on K2.

The Willis Wall has seen very little action from climbers since the initial ascents in the late 1960s and early ’70s. Tom Boley and Jack Lewis climbed the West Rib in 1976, finding another way through the ice cliff at the top of the wall. But these days, very few climbers even attempt it. By the mid-1970s the era of cutting-edge climbs on Rainier had arguably passed.

When I asked Colin Haley—one of the world’s best alpinists, who started his career in the Pacific Northwest—for his opinion on this, he said Tahoma’s importance was at its zenith from the 1930s through the ’60s. “In this era when technical climbing skills were less advanced, Tahoma was the main training ground of many of the best alpinists in the US,” he said.

Indeed, many of America’s most successful and famous high-altitude climbers cut their teeth on Mt. Rainier, preparing themselves for harsh and dangerous conditions on similar terrain in the Himalaya.

IN THE MIDDLE OF A sleepless night on the Ingraham Glacier, I hobble out of my tent to pee. The Milky Way is projected overhead as I squeak along the firm, cold snow; my hometown of Yakima, Washington, twinkles in the night around 11,000 feet below. Although I do not long to be down there, I feel lonely on the mountain—no one up here understands my connection to this place, to Takhoma. My midnight saunter on the moonlit glacier feels fleetingly special and melancholy to the bone; I feel it is only mine, but it is not. Such a moment has belonged to so many before and will to many after me. Returning to my North Face “Assault” tent after my bathroom break, I relish the tent’s contrast to my existence—a Native American mountain guide working on his ancestral homelands. Sitting in a proper conquistador’s shelter, the “Assault,” I ask myself, *How do I value the summit and the storied landscape surrounding it?*

It has taken quite some time for me to publish my story, as doubts often circulate in my head: *Is it worth it? Will people care?* But then I think of my younger self or my young cousins on the Yakama Reservation, each like a wandering star above Takhoma searching for a connection to place and time, stifled by a colonial belief of “wilderness,” a place devoid of man and “untrammeled.”

Everyone in my family has had a connection to the outdoors, whether through fly-fishing, running (which was initially how I experienced the outdoors) or raising cattle, like my grandfather. Growing up, as I learned more about my family’s history and exploration throughout the Yakama Reservation, I became curious about their journey

to the mountains. Most of Takhoma (Mt. Rainier) is visible from town, while Pahto (Mt. Adams) is the centerpiece of the valley my family grew up in. When I was younger, my grandpa told me a story about a young Yakama man who sought the summit of Takhoma in search of a buried treasure. He tried three times, and then, on the fourth, he found himself atop the great white mountain. As he stared into the fiery lake on the summit, his reflection expanded out of the lake and took the form of Takhoma’s spirit. Concerned for his safety, he threw the treasure into the lake and fled. Returning home without the treasure, he had no proof he had made it to the summit, and his friends laughed. If only I had heard the moral of this story as a kid, because it all makes so much sense now. Upon my first summit, I, too, thought it was everything. It was the first time I was beholden to the subscription of a summit as a portal to success—I just did not know it was a lie. The true gift of Takhoma is not on the summit; it is all around him (Takhoma’s spirit).

Yakima is known for its hops, actor Kyle MacLachlan and not much else, especially not political correctness. So when I left my hometown for Seattle to attend the University of Washington, I was floored to say the least. Prior to college, I had not readily embraced my Native American heritage. All I knew was I had a Tribal ID for some reason, treaties were generally a farce and I did not look like an “Indian.” Arriving at the UW campus, I was quickly overcome by culture shock. Simply telling people I was Native (American) was enough to earn my place in this new, diverse metropolis. Soon I learned my yearning to “look Native” had been a

form of internalized racism, a new term to me. Eventually, I entered the American Indian studies program, pursuing classes on culture and US and Canadian federal law. But as the walls of academia shrunk around me, I habitually skipped class to be outside. The freedom of movement I found running had blossomed into mountaineering, and it was all I craved. It wasn’t long before I was spending every waking moment mountaineering in the summer and then wishing I was in the mountains when I was at school.

In 2017 I started skiing, and consequently I attended only a portion of the winter quarter as I obsessed over this new mountain activity. My gluttony for time outside inflated. It was an era of consumption and conquering, and I did not want it any other way. I know colonization when I see it; after all, I am Native American. But even I adopted a dyed-in-the-wool conqueror’s mindset when approaching mountain climbing. Alpinism as a concept is overrated, but as an activity and pursuit, it began to fuel my life. Sometimes this was to the detriment of deep relationships, while at the same time it ignited new ones. What a clichéd story, though, right? The man-boy with Peter Pan syndrome who pursues mountains while neglecting relationships and emotional health. You can throw a dime in Seattle, Denver, Bozeman or any other mountain town and hit someone with a similar story, but mine has more nuance and irony.

It wasn’t until I met Owen Oliver that my approach to mountain climbing began to shift. Among other tribes, Owen also comes from the Chinook, at the mouth of the Columbia River, which, historically,

The Rise of the Whittakers

IN 1963, JIM WHITTAKER BECAME the first American to stand on top of the highest point in the world. But in the preceding decade, Jim and his twin brother, Lou, were cutting their teeth guiding on Mt. Rainier. They worked under Bil Dunaway, who at the time had a one-year informal partnership with the National Park Service to guide on the mountain. The twins were also early members of Seattle Mountain Rescue (formerly Mountain Rescue Council), and they served as instructors in the Army for nearly two years during the Korean War, training soldiers in the 10th Mountain Division. In 1955, Jim became

the first full-time employee of REI (then known as The Co-op).

As a mountain guide on Rainier, Jim was often faced with the choice of whether to cancel summit bids because of storms raging outside the shelters at Camp Muir. “On Rainier you always got out of the damn camp and started up. Because what if you cancel the climb, and then you’re sitting there at Camp Muir, the mountain clears and the wind dies down?” Jim said in an interview with *The Seattle Times* in 2013. “You always start up, because you can always turn around.” Over the next decade and a half, Jim and Lou climbed Rainier dozens of times, as well as Denali, and built a reputation for being very strong mountaineers. Both twins were invited on the Mt. Everest expedition,

is just a stone's throw from the Yakama and Cowlitz Nations (where I come from). Undoubtedly, our tribes have been linked since time immemorial, so we quickly became brothers bonding over college antics, singing along to the hits of Snotty Nose Rez Kids and reminiscing about the (mis)adventures of young manhood.

After I convinced Owen to spend his bottom dollar on mountaineering boots, we climbed Dragontail Peak in October 2018. I thought I would blow his socks off—larches, alpine lakes, mountains, surely he would leave a changed man! How could he not? I had found solace in those spaces and I believed he would too. Stopping for water along Colchuck Lake, he looked all around. Then his eyes met mine and he said, "Look around, Calvin. You come from these places. Colchuck is even a Chinuk Jargon word, something from our people. No wonder you like being here, this is what it's all about." I chuckled and brushed it off without fully knowing what he meant, but I knew he was right. There we were, in my haven from all stressors, and this newfound brother blew it all up. With his simple gesture, the gravity of decolonization pulled me into a special moment in place and time. I thought, *What other mountains or lakes use our language, Chinuk Jargon, and how do I relate to that?*

I graduated college the following spring, in 2019, and the next day I started my job as a mountain guide on Takhoma. Ready to throw myself into the crucible, I worked roughly twenty trips on the mountain that year, acquiring a dozen summits. My youthful exuberance shone brightly as I eagerly shared my knowledge of decolonization with clients, along with the whole truth of the mountain. But it turned out that my explanations of Manifest Destiny and childhood labor camps (aka Indian



[Photo] **Cal' Smith smiles on the summit of Pahto (Mt. Adams), south of Takhoma.** Courtesy of Cal' Smith

their clients lean into what they could learn? Did their employers celebrate all they had to contribute and welcome critiques alongside the summits?

I think back now, after six years of guiding on Takhoma, throughout the Cascades and into the Colorado Rockies, to the story my grandpa told me about the Yakama man who found treasure on the summit of Takhoma. It was not until I received an education from my peers, elders, community and mentors that I earned this treasure—a commodity more valuable than buried gold—and it is my turn to pass this wisdom on: to the other two-legged who seek to conquer the wilderness, to the urban Native kids who do not have community or identity, to my clients when they rope up with me. To those who seek Takhoma's summit.

During my days of peak-bagging and conquering mountains, I, too, was lost like the Yakama man, searching for mythic treasures buried high on mountain summits. This gift is never truly yours; it belongs to the next person to come and to those behind them. It may come in self-restoration after trials and tribulations or in a sense of accomplishment after triumphing over physical or mental boundaries. Whichever it is, once you find it with Takhoma, be sure not to wield it. Knowledge and education are not weapons. Walk with it. Share with those in your community what you will do with this new knowledge. Utilize what you were gifted and educate your family and community; abstaining will spoil Takhoma's gift and it will rot from the inside out.

Whether you reach the summit or not, Takhoma has given you energy. I ask that you redirect it so that it may enrich others.

though Lou decided he couldn't go.

On the way to Everest's highpoint, Jim and his partner Nawang Gombu took a chance on going to the top despite a raging storm hammering their tent the night before the climb. Blizzard-like wind was blowing snow around them so hard that they couldn't see their feet. "All I knew was what I had to do. You were so committed, working for years on this, being halfway around the world. We wanted to summit so bad. You can see how people die," Jim said in an interview published in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* in 2005. Though it was Everest that brought him fame, it was Rainier that had prepared him for success. In correspondence quoted in *The Challenge of Rainier*,

Whittaker compared the two mountains: "Mount Rainier has all the features of Mount Everest except the lack of oxygen that goes with higher elevations. As far as glaciers, icefalls, rock ridges, and a true summit are concerned, Mount Rainier has them all."

After Everest, Jim experienced a huge amount of fame. It presented him opportunities such as guiding Senator Robert Kennedy on a first ascent of a peak in the Canadian Yukon, putting together the first successful American expedition to climb K2 and leading the 1990 Everest International Peace Climb, which placed members from rival countries the Soviet Union, China and the United States on the summit of Everest together.



While Jim holds the title of the more famous twin, Lou Whittaker had a greater impact on the history of Mt. Rainier, and on many people who learned to climb there. By 1968 Lou had been guiding on the mountain for two decades. That year, along with his business partner Jerry Lynch, he started Rainier Mountaineering, Inc. (RMI), which began operation under a series of one-year permits. That setup lasted until 1975, when they received the first of several multiyear contracts to be the sole guide service on the mountain. RMI remained the only guide service until 2006, when the National Park System allowed two other companies to guide on the mountain.

For his part, Lou summited Rainier more than 250 times and guided thousands of climbers up the mountain. “I never get tired of seeing people’s faces when we get to the summit, of hearing them shout, or weep, with joy,” Lou wrote in *Memoirs of a Mountain Guide*. His most famous quote is telling of the larger-than-life persona that he and his brother took on, portraying his attitude toward the mountaineering life he led: “When it comes to dying, I want to know what it is like to have really lived.”

Lou’s sons Win and Peter both followed in their father’s footsteps and became guides on Rainier. Peter reached Rainier’s summit in 1971 for the first time when he was only twelve years old and started guiding on the mountain just four years later. Eventually, Peter became part owner in the family business, which he continues to operate, and for which he still guides—a career that has led to more than 200 ascents of Rainier.

Peter has an unwavering respect for Rainier as a place of global significance. “So many of the climbers notching first ascents on the world’s highest mountains—Everest, K2, Kangchenjunga (in the 1960s and 70s)—came from the Northwest because of the snow, ice and glacial features that are here,” he told me.

Peter still has a deep relationship with the mountain. As much as he reveres the peak and its previous significance for elite climbers, he acknowledges that Rainier is probably not where leading alpinists are cutting their teeth in the present day. But that doesn’t mean

there aren’t opportunities. “In terms of a training ground, Rainier still has plenty of technical terrain that nobody gets on,” Peter pointed out. There are over fifty routes on the mountain and 95 percent of the climbing is done on just two. Peter feels strongly that there are still challenges available on Rainier to push climbers wanting to hone their skills in alpinism. Though places like Alaska hold more difficult climbing, Rainier remains a place to test oneself, he insisted.

Rainier Is for Everyone

WHILE THE LAST CLIMBS WERE being established on the more challenging aspects of Rainier, the increased presence of mountain guides meant less experienced climbers were also visiting the mountain more frequently. The early 1960s saw the rise of recreational climbing on Rainier with over 1,000 people attempting the mountain and 599 reaching the summit in 1961—a manyfold increase from 1852, when just four climbers attempted the ascent, according to statistics compiled by the National Park Service. In the 1960s and ’70s, climbing Rainier started to become significantly more popular, partly because of the number of visitors to the region.

The 1962 World’s Fair was held in Seattle, attracting nearly two million people to Mt. Rainier National Park that same year. New infrastructure followed. The park authorized winter climbing for the first time in 1965, relinquishing some of its grip on what climbers were allowed to do. Advancement in climbing technology and improved access to gear helped climbers during this era. By 1970 there were 3,192 registered climbers on the mountain.

In the spring of 1980, Dan Davis completed the first ski descent of the Fuhrer Finger. Tom Janisch and Jeff Haley joined Davis, but began their descent from below the summit, while Davis skied from the top. The steep line on the south side of the mountain can include approximately 10,400 feet of vertical descent if taken all the way down to Glacier Bridge, which spans the Nisqually River. Ski descents like the Fuhrer Finger helped usher in more skiers to the mountain, adding another draw to the peak besides climbing.

While Rainier was becoming quite popular, and the standard routes well-trodden, the dangers of the mountain continued to loom over visitors. That was particularly apparent on June 21, 1981, as senior RMI guide John Day led a party of twenty-five climbers—twenty clients and five guides, including Day—to the Disappointment Cleaver around 5:30 a.m. Day and his fellow guides Peter Whittaker and Michael Targett continued ahead to scope out conditions on the route. They determined that the slopes were too dangerous to continue. As they descended, they heard a loud crack. A large ice formation toppled from the glacier above and caused a massive avalanche that swept down upon the twenty-two climbers waiting at the base. Despite the guides’ calls to run, which the group did without hesitation, eleven people died. It was one of the deadliest accidents in American mountaineering history.

Out of the forty-one routes listed in Mike Gauthier’s climbing guidebook, only a handful were established after the 1970s. The challenge of establishing new routes on Rainier was exemplified in a pair of reports in *The American Alpine Journal* in the early 1990s. In a 1994 report, Scott C. Davis claimed a new direct route on the Sunset Amphitheater Headwall, marked by climbing up to 5.8 and

[Facing Page] **Left to right: Tom Hornbein, Tenzing Norgay, Ang Lamu and Jim Whittaker in Mt. Rainier National Park.** Courtesy of the National Park Service | [This Page, Top] **Dan Davis climbs up with skis on his back before completing the historic first ski descent of the Fuhrer Finger in 1980.** | [This Page, Bottom] **Davis descends the Fuhrer Finger on skis. Of his climbing partners on the trip, Davis was the only one to ski from the summit to the bottom.** Mazama Library & Historical Collections (both)

WI4. Though perhaps it was an honest mistake, the next year the *AAJ* issued a correction to this route, saying it was likely climbed by members of the Pamirs expedition in 1974.

Despite the lack of new first ascents on Rainier, the mountain became increasingly popular for the casual climber. In 1995 over 10,000 climbers attempted to climb Rainier. So far, the year 2000 has been the highpoint for registered climbers, at 13,114.

To Infinity and Beyond

AS THE NUMBER OF CLIMBERS increased on Rainier, so too did the number of people challenging themselves to feats of endurance, with more than a summit. In the early 2000s, Chad Kellogg, a well-known Rainier climbing ranger, dreamed up what he called the Infinity Loop. His idea was for an unsupported effort that would go up and over the mountain twice and circumnavigate it once on the Wonderland Trail (in two segments), creating a figure-eight-shaped route around and across the mountain.

Kellogg made the first sub-five-hour ascent and descent of Rainier in 2004 and made three speed climbing attempts on Everest in 2010, 2012 and 2013. According to the website *Fastest Known Time*, he also set a record for the quickest round-trip on Denali (20,310') in 2003; his time of just under twenty-four hours stood for a decade before it was broken. (The current record, set by Jack Kuenzle in 2023, is 10 hours, 14 minutes and 57 seconds.) Sadly, Kellogg died in 2014 while descending Fitz Roy in Patagonia before he was able to complete his dream on Rainier.

Two years after Kellogg's death, endurance athletes Gavin Woody and Ras Vaughan accomplished the Infinity Loop in July 2016. They were on the go for 99 hours and 7 minutes, and covered more than 120 miles while gaining 40,000 feet in elevation. The feat was remarkable in part because of the planning, preparation and very specific gear they brought. Their packs weighed just twenty-four pounds at the start and ended at fifteen pounds, despite the pair's use of a full glacier safety kit.

"When we began our second summit climb the reality of it began to sink in and I realized that we were going to be able to do it," Vaughan said in a 2016 article published in *Mountaineer* magazine. "It wasn't going to be fast and it wasn't going to be pretty; it was going to be a sufferfest, but from that point on I knew we had it and all we had to do was grind it out."

In 2019, after having eyes on the Infinity Loop for three years, two women from Portland, Oregon, and Issaquah, Washington, set out to break the fastest known time (FKT). Up to then four parties had completed the route. Alex Borsuk and Kaytlyn Gerbin, ultra-runners and accomplished mountaineers, nearly abandoned their attempt when they got stuck in a storm during their second summit



bid. Faced with winds that exceeded fifty-five miles per hour and whiteout conditions, they turned back and descended to their car at Paradise. After getting some rest and drying their clothes in the Paradise bathrooms, they decided to resume their efforts as the weather improved. They summited the mountain the second time at 8:03 a.m. on a Saturday—and they still had to descend the Emmons Glacier and run sixty-nine miles of the Wonderland Trail. By the last stretch, the women were taking brief naps, huddling under an emergency blanket to stay warm and even falling asleep in the middle of the trail.

"This was the most raw and intimate way to experience Rainier," Gerbin told Tacoma's *News Tribune*. "I can't wrap my mind around what we did."

Fast and light climbing focused on endurance has played out on more technical and dangerous routes as well. Liberty Ridge became a canvas for speed ascents by some of the best alpinists of the 2010s. In 2017, Eric Carter, Nick Elson and Colin Haley set an FKT of Liberty Ridge. Days later, brothers Andy and Jason Dorais smashed their record. The pair climbed and skinned up Liberty Ridge and skied down the Emmons Glacier in seven hours and seven minutes, beating the previous time by about two hours.



Modern Visitors

IN SPITE OF THE NUMBER of climbers and record-setters returning to Rainier each year, the mountain has remained relatively quiet as a climbing destination compared to other mountains of similar stature and difficulty. According to a 2019 article published in *The New York Times*, at least 20,000 people attempt to climb Mont Blanc in the summer every year. That's nearly double the attempts on Rainier in a typical year. Mont Blanc also has a more deadly history.

Regulations governing the number of people on Rainier might help explain the relative lack of climbers on its flanks. The permit system requires anyone traveling above 10,000 feet or climbing or skiing on a glacier to get a permit, as well as pay an annual climbing fee (\$68 in 2024).

Another challenge for climbers is the limited access to the road to Paradise (the most popular starting point up the mountain) during the winter, which runs from November to May. Furthermore, the summer of 2024 was the first time that the park used a timed entry reservation system for the Paradise and Sunrise entrances, two of the most popular ways into the park.

While there are two major metropolitan cities, Tacoma and Seattle, just sixty and eighty miles away, respectively, there is still no major infrastructure on the mountain. To this day, there are no funiculars, mountain chalets or restaurants high on its flanks, despite efforts to build similar infrastructure in the early days of the national park.

Still, approximately two million people visit the park each year. Many of those visitors are novice climbers and skiers, who appreciate the relatively easy access to mountain environments, especially compared to other national parks in the country (though there is still no easy route to the summit).

Some of Rainier's modern ski visitors share an obsession with "Turns All Year." These skiers and snowboarders go to great lengths to link a few turns in every season, no matter how far they must hike to get to snow or what the conditions are. An entire community has been built around finding partners, sharing beta and setting streaks.

The popularity of skiing brings its own set of problems, particularly from the standpoint of the climbing rangers. Ranger Stefan Lofgren is an advocate for skiing on Rainier and has skied from the summit himself. Still, he is seeing an increasing number of accidents



on the mountain involving skiers who either don't have enough experience or don't know when to take their skis off and put crampons on. He believes that there is a bright future for skiers on the mountain, but he would like to see more people working their way up and gaining the right classic mountaineering skills before they commit to a full ascent or descent on their planks.

At the same time, Rainier continues to be a place where climbers go to train and learn—whether that training is for a complex trip to the Himalaya or simply to learn the basics of glacier travel. Peter Horsman, the current president of the Washington Alpine Club, has climbed Rainier many times, especially to train for his successful climbs of Mt. Everest and Lhotse in 2023.

“Last year I climbed Rainier twice to test my gear for Everest,” he told me. “I used my big mountaineering boots and other Everest gear and practiced with it on the mountain.” For many members of the club, Horsman said, “Rainier is sort of like the crown jewel”—a great testpiece for climbing beyond Washington state.

Since The Mountaineers climbed the mountain in 1909, only three years after the club was founded, members have been using the slopes of Rainier to train for expeditions around the world. So it's no

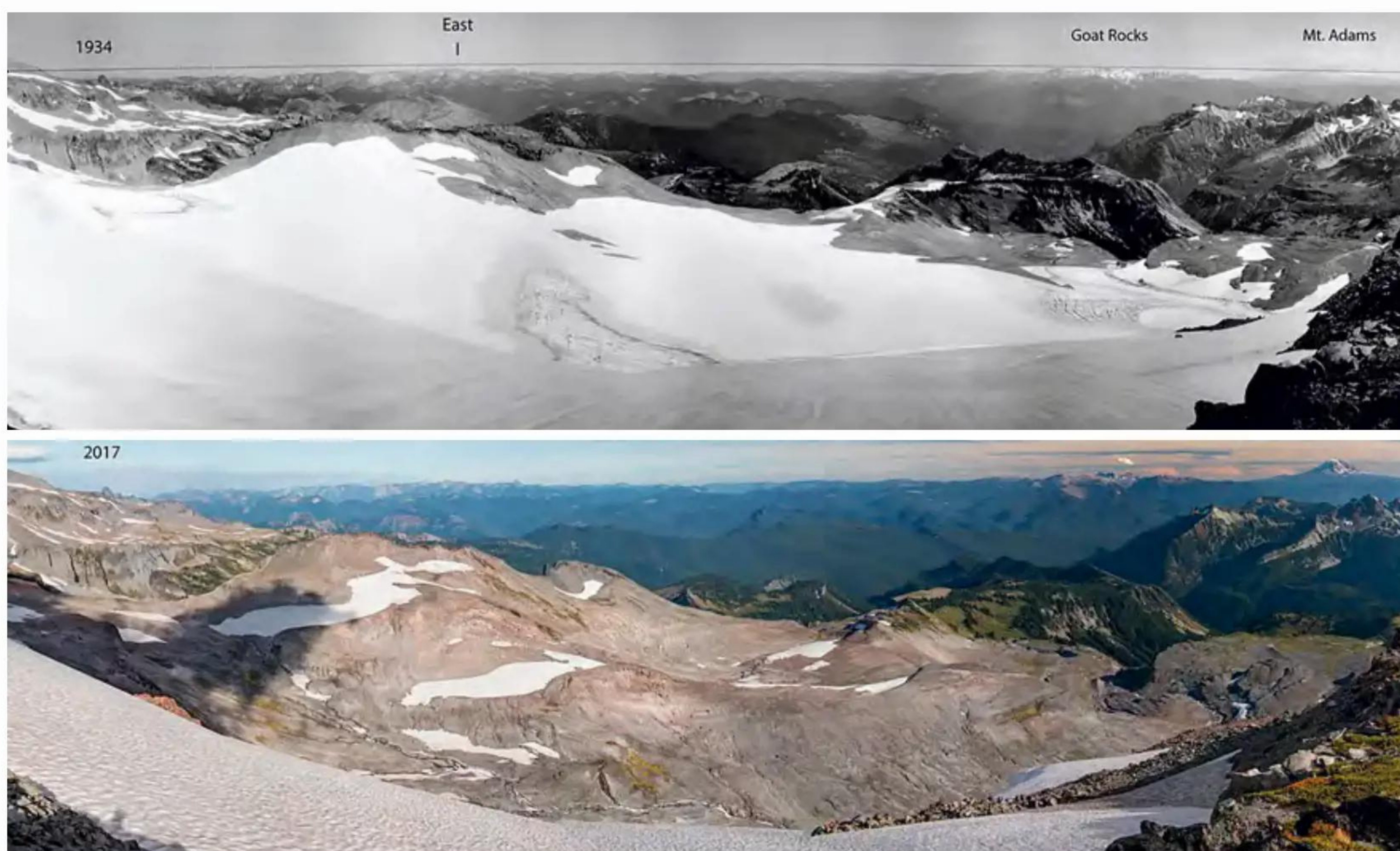
[Photo] **Amber Chang approaches Mt. Rainier from Paradise with skis on her back and shoes on her feet, joining the community skiing the mountain all year.** Jason Hummel

surprise that Tom Vogl, the current Mountaineers CEO, believes that Rainier plays an important role for the organization. “Just the physical prominence of the mountain gives it a very special meaning to The Mountaineers,” he said.

Shrinking Glaciers, Growing Visitors

THIS SUMMER, at around 7:30 a.m. on a bluebird day in late July, a climbing party on the DC route heard what sounded like military jets flying overhead. Instead, what they saw, and captured on film, was a massive avalanche, caused by collapsing snow and ice above the Ingraham Flats camp. The avalanche wiped out visible climbing tracks, where the party had trod just hours before.

A few weeks prior, Alpine Ascents International reported a large crevasse collapse at 12,800 feet. It altered the standard route established on the DC and forced the guides to doctor a new path for their



[Photo] Looking southeast from the Sugarloaf (7,789') on the southeast flanks of Mt. Rainier. Taken eighty-three years apart, the photos help emphasize the impact of climate change on the peak's snow and ice cover. The top photo was taken in 1934, during a winter marked by low snowfall. Meanwhile, the bottom photo was captured in a season of higher snow totals. Courtesy of the Nature Conservancy

clients, and thereby the general public. Incidents like these seem to be increasingly commonplace, and the seasons to reliably climb Rainier safely appear to be shrinking.

In 2023, in an August 30 Instagram post, Alpine Ascents announced it was shutting down their climbing season on Rainier, much earlier than they historically would. The post read:

We feel the glacier has deteriorated to a point where we can no longer piece the route back together in a form that is within our sphere of risk management. The decline of route conditions this early in the season is unprecedented and we are saddened to see our home mountain in such poor climbing shape.

“As things continue to change on the upper mountain, that’s going to really change the way people approach the mountain and ultimately the way people climb the mountain,” author and educator Jeff Antonelis-Lapp told me.

A 2023 NPS study showed a 42 percent reduction in glacier area from 1896 to 2021 and officially knocked the Stevens Glacier off its list of glaciers. The firn line, the point at which exposed glacier ice transitions to the snow-covered surface of a glacier, now starts at higher elevations. With less snow and firn, climbers are spending more time on exposed, uneven terrain. As this unfolds, it’s becoming trickier to find passage on climbing routes that rely on the glaciers. Some routes also take longer to complete because climbers have to navigate around unseasonably large crevasses, opened by the heat of warming summers.

As climate change diminishes the environment at every level, Colin Haley, who remains at the forefront of alpinism, believes that Rainier may lose its appeal as a climbing destination. “As the ice continues to melt, Tahoma will become an increasingly unappealing mountain, as the underlying ‘rock’ is rotten and terrible to climb on,” he said.

All these signs portend a more immediate and catastrophic disaster. Though many people who live near the mountain erroneously

worry about Rainier erupting, the biggest threat is the real possibility of lahars.

A lahar, according to the US Geological Survey, is “a hot or cold mixture of water and rock fragments that flows down the slopes of a volcano and typically enters a river valley.” As the glaciers melt, the chance for catastrophic and unimaginable lahars increases.

“The scientists have substantial data to believe that the upper part of the Puyallup Glacier, including Sunset Amphitheater and the Puyallup Cleaver, will someday give way in a single pulse or a series of sieges and come rushing down the Puyallup Valley and cover the lowlands all the way into Tacoma’s Commencement Bay,” said Antonelis-Lapp.

According to the City of Puyallup, a volcanic mudflow from Rainier could reach 100 feet high and travel up to fifty miles per hour. A lahar would likely bury most man-made structures, essentially destroying the community. Puyallup tests a lahar warning system every first Monday of the month, a sobering reminder of the potential catastrophic power that Rainier retains.

The Future Looks to the Past

IN THE SUMMER OF 2022, Rachel Heaton shouldered a ninety-pound pack filled with clothing, climbing gear and traditional foods and began the trek up Rainier on a guided climb with Alpine Ascents. She felt ready for a summit bid, but the weather took a turn for the worse. Her group hunkered down as rain splattered the slushy snow. Outside, water pooled around Heaton’s tent, and inside she started to feel anxious. Eventually, some days into the climb, she made the tough decision to turn around.

Heaton, a member of the Muckleshoot Tribe and a descendant of the Duwamish people, has tried to climb the mountain several other times. On one of those occasions, in 2023, she led the first

known all-Native summit attempt on the mountain. Though they were again turned back by environmental factors, Heaton's efforts to bring more Indigenous people and knowledge to the mountain are part of a bigger goal.

When she started hiking in the area several years earlier, Heaton realized she wasn't seeing her people on the trails, slopes and ridges of *təq'ubəʔ*, even though there are six Indigenous tribes who live near the mountain.

"That means our stories aren't out there," she said. It also means that the traditional wisdom and knowledge that Indigenous people have about the environment is missing from those spaces. "I realized a lot of us were fighting for Mother Earth, but we weren't necessarily connected to Mother Earth."

By opening up opportunities for her community to access the mountains, Heaton hopes to improve everyone's relationship to the natural world.

"How can we look at being in the outdoors as a sacred space and make these experiences less transactional?" she said.

If Heaton had reached the top of the mountain during those attempts, she would have been the first Indigenous woman ancestrally tied to the mountain known to have summited (she is still hoping to do so). Cal' Smith, a member of the Yakama Nation, first summited Tahoma in 2016. The summit—only one marker of success, he now feels—inspired more questions: Was he the first to climb since his ancestors? But Smith believes that recognition is tied up in colonialism and racism.

"I'm probably not the first [Indigenous person] to summit Tahoma but [I probably am] one of the first to relish and own it and to relate it to what I do," said Smith. He believes that his Indigenous ancestors climbed Tahoma long before he stepped foot on the mountain, but that no one recorded an ascent until his climb in 2016.

"There's a mindset that Indigenous people aren't in tune with these high places," Smith said. Just like people today see a highpoint and want to climb it, he's sure that his ancestors must have felt the same desire. Smith hopes to change these perceptions about how Indigenous people have historically interacted with the mountain.

Perhaps this redirection starts with the renaming of the mountain. It would be one small way to return Tahoma to its original inhabitants. For Heaton, the future of climbing on the mountain involves educating climbers, recreationists and tourists about who came before them. That is why you may find her on the mountain telling stories of her ancestors, engaging in smudging ceremonies, an important sacred activity, and extending land acknowledgments at times.

"There needs to be an introduction to these places again with the tribes at the forefront," Cal' Smith said.

As we grapple with the reality of climate change, shortened climbing seasons and the growing number of visitors flocking to this mountain of many names, many constants remain. There is a vibrant life force embedded in the DNA of the land, unchanging and unmoving since time immemorial. The mountain continues to be a beacon, a magnet for those who live in its vicinity, pulling them in close with the promise of wild spaces, unique experiences and powerful transformations. The mountain remains a place for growth, a training ground for climbers and non-climbers alike, those looking to push themselves to discover what's deep within.

Passing the Torch

FOLLOWING OUR FIRST SUMMER OF climbing in 2014, Kristy and I developed an unbreakable partnership, formed in the mountains. After four years of climbing, sleeping next to each other in close quarters in precarious situations, and never getting tired of each other, we decided to seal our commitment. We tied the knot in 2019, at a beautiful inn just twenty miles from the Paradise entrance to Mt. Rainier National Park. Another five years later, in July 2023, Kristy and I plodded uphill toward Ptarmigan Ridge on the northwest side of the park. We climbed out of the trees from Mowich Lake into a field of dewy wildflowers. The wet ground squelched and squirted under our feet as views of Tahoma materialized, unobstructed but for a wisp of clouds covering the summit like a toupee. Though we've had more challenging experiences on other mountains, Rainier remains a special place for us—it's where we built a partnership, where we got married, where I brought my dad for his first time on skis. And it's where we're teaching our kids about wild spaces. On this day our packs were heavy, nearly fifty pounds each. But instead of climbing ropes, ice axes and pickets, we were carrying two kids, Ari and Luca, just three and one years old. We were backpacking to a place we had been before, yet never experienced so intimately.

We set up camp next to a small glacier tarn. It was merely a few hundred feet from a busy trail, but we saw almost no one. It was a bubble of isolation, our own slice of solitude. Our kids jumped into the shallow water, laughing and giggling at the toads, marveling at the rocks and flowers and bugs. We felt at peace in the wild space surrounding us. Throughout the weekend, my attention was occasionally drawn to the ridges and faces in the distance, calling me to climb them. Yet my focus always returned to the beauty at my feet, to the tasks at hand and to my children, smiling and playing, momentarily carefree, in this alpine paradise.

I have always thought that, in another life, I would have been on the cutting edge of alpinism. In the ten years since I first climbed Rainier, I gained many of the skills, the fitness and the mental toughness that I believe it takes to climb at a high level in the mountains. Instead, I chose a different path. I reached many beautiful summits in the Cascades, I established a meaningful career as a gear representative and I helped start a wonderful family.

Kristy and I came to Rainier to share our love of the mountains, this mountain, and to pay homage to a place that's given so much to our lives. We hope to share places with our kids where they can be themselves, connect with nature and simply be happy in the moment. Rainier is one of those special places where we feel most at home, and maybe our kids will too.

As the sun set over the hills to our west, as reds, yellows and pinks faded into darkness, our little family had the perfect view of a perfect day coming to a close. We hadn't tackled any technical routes, climbed any steep faces or even come close to the summit, yet we all collapsed into a heap of contented, quiet and peaceful sleep on the flanks of the mountain. Whether Ari and Luca become climbers or not isn't important. What matters is that they learn to take care of the wild places that are left, of which Rainier has many, fragile and dangerous though they may be. ■



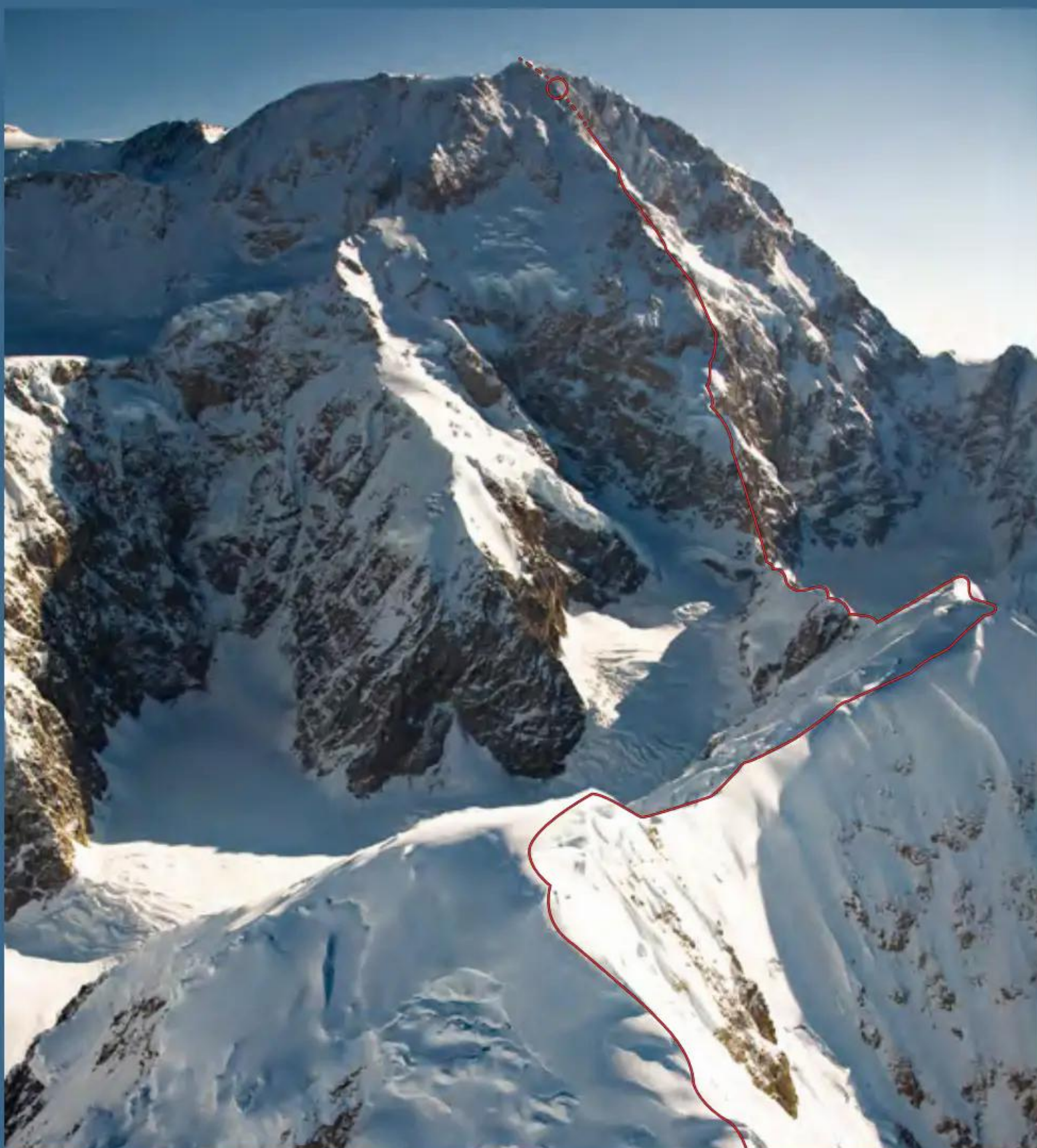


BIBIRI

Following footsteps of
the Giri-Giri Boys on Denali

Toranosuke Nagayama

Editor's Note: In the mid-2000s, a group of Japanese climbers arrived in Alaska and it wasn't long before they took the world of alpinism by storm. They became known as the Giri-Giri Boys after jokingly using the name to register for an air taxi in 2006. In 2008, five of them—Tatsuro “Tats” Yamada, Yuto Inoue, Fumitaka “Itchy” Ichimura, Yusuke Sato and Katsutaka “Jumbo” Yokoyama—were back in the Alaska Range. It was the fourth straight season for Ichimura and Yokoyama. For the finale of the trip, Yamada and Inoue, the younger climbers of the group, set off to link the ridgeline of the Kahiltna Peaks across the Kahiltna Notch and onto the Cassin Ridge to the top of Denali (20,310') while the other three enchainned the Isis Face with the Slovak Direct to the summit. Sadly, Yamada and Inoue disappeared near the top of the Great One. Their bodies were found the following year at 19,800 feet.



In a feature for Issue 26 (2009), translated from the Japanese by Hiko Ito, Yokoyama wrote:

Tats and Yuto probably didn't make it to Denali's summit. It's likely they had some kind of accident near the top. Still, I envied them. They were the first to reveal the Cassin's true line of ascent. I stared at the photograph and retraced their route. Though climbers should leave no physical marks on a mountain, we like to believe our passion remains on the lines we draw. We want to follow the lines that only we can make out, that only we can climb.

To my regret, I have never encountered a line on which I could express myself fully. But those two made their statement just by leaving their tracks. Although the footsteps in the snow will disappear, the path in the photo retains their passion.

It was the essence and the realization of Giri-Giri Style...

People ask me all the time: "Hey, what does Giri-Giri mean?"

It's not easy to answer...

The quantity of climbing in Japan is still limited. But there is a solution to that, too. It's called Pachinko.

Pachinko gets its name from a popular 1970s pinball game in Japan, with its erratic up-and-down movements on irregular trajectories. Simply put, Pachinko is a linkup of multiple routes, and it helps us train for bigger mountains abroad.

Words and translations are never simple, though: we use the phrase "play" Pachinko, but don't let that fool you. It can push you to your limits...

And as I played this particular Pachinko, I realized that all climbing is illogical. Because we live in a modern, rational world, the value of climbing increases with its irrationality. Pachinko—climbing up, coming back down, then repeating the process—has no rationale. It could be the answer to this age of advanced equipment, technical skills and information: Does our reliance on these means weaken our passion?

If so, pick a mountain range. Open a map and trace a route, any route. When you do, you might see that we've only been playing on a portion of a mountain. The more you think about how to enjoy the mountain fully, the more possibilities you'll discover...

So what's the definition of Giri-Giri?

At first, it was a joke: the Giri-Giri Boys comes from the name of a Japanese celebrity group called the Giri-Giri Girls. Two years ago at the Talkeetna Air Taxi office, we were waiting for the pilot Paul Roderick to fly us to the Alaska Range, when a receptionist asked us the name of our expedition. We didn't have one.

"Giri-Giri Boys!" Tats exclaimed.

"What's up with that?" I asked Tats.

"It doesn't really matter—we can name ourselves anything," he said.

But when people started calling us the Giri-Giri Boys, the name stuck. And one night back in Japan over sake, it all made sense.

"Giri-Giri" means "barely" in Japanese, and everything about us could be described by those words. We barely have enough money, experience or technique. We're barely young enough to call ourselves boys (perhaps we're too old already). But we want to face the mountain with overflowing motivation and ambition, and we want to climb to our bare limit.

Doing so, I believed, would lead us to something that would let our passion take shape.

More than fifteen years after Yokoyama wrote those words, that passion lives on in a new generation. This is their story.

—Derek Franz

ONE OF US said a word. The metallic clink of carabiners swinging from our harnesses and the sharp rustle of fabric grated on our ears, unnervingly loud in the silence. Genya and I were busy setting up the tent, while Takeda packed snow into a stuffsack to make water. The high camp at 17,200 feet was a world apart from what it had been during our acclimatization two weeks earlier. Around twenty tents of various shapes and sizes had sprung up, forming a small settlement. From a distance, the boisterous laughter, reminiscent of a scene from an American sitcom, rang out clearly across the camp.

We had traversed the Kahiltna Peaks and climbed the Cassin Ridge to reach this point, but our spirits were at rock bottom. Regret over not summiting, relief that the three of us had safely descended to a relatively secure spot, and ten days' worth of exhaustion hit us all at once. Surprisingly, there was no sense of accomplishment whatsoever. No matter how hard I searched for words to offer my climbing partners, every single one I could think of felt like it would rub someone's nerves the wrong way.

Just hours earlier, when we finished climbing the Cassin Ridge and returned to this high camp, I never imagined that I would be feeling like this. I thought it would be much more uplifting, and that this would turn out to be the liveliest camp of the entire expedition. But now, the endless possibilities of "what if" swirled through my mind like a storm.

We had decided to begin our descent from Kahiltna Horn, approximately 200 feet lower than the 20,310-foot summit of Denali, without setting foot on top. This spot, where the Cassin Ridge meets the West Buttress, left us only a simple knife-edge ridge to the roof of North America. As close as we were, there was no real question about which direction we needed to go; I started descending immediately.

The three of us—Subaru Takeda, Genya Takenaka and I—simply couldn't traverse that knife-edge ridge. I instinctively knew it. Genya had been immobilized by hypothermia before we even started our summit push that morning, and Takeda and I were already worn out from fatigue. Shrouded in wind and snow, the ridgeline leading to the summit looked to me like the line between life and death. I couldn't shake the thought of the two climbers who had disappeared near here in 2008. Takeda desperately tried to convince Genya and me to push for the top, but I pulled him down by the rope that tied us together, forcing us to go down.

Later, as I pitched the tent at high camp, my mind kept drifting back to that moment. What could I possibly say to Takeda and Genya, who had been forced to give up on the summit just below the top?

"I'm sorry." The words slipped out against my will. Even if saying "sorry" would only frustrate them more, I couldn't keep it inside. The weight of it was unbearable.

IN A TRIBUTE to Tatsuro Yamada and Yuto Inoue, Katsutaka Yokoyama wrote, "If the two had reached the summit, it would have been a complete traverse of Denali's south ridge, a beautiful, nearly perfect

line." In 2011, Kei Taniguchi and Yasuhiro Hanatani made a second attempt at the route but were forced to retreat in a life-or-death struggle, beaten back by brutal weather and conditions. The line has remained incomplete to this day.

The spark of passion ignited by Yamada and Inoue burned its way through time along that route, reaching Takeda, Genya and me—continuing to inspire and be carried forward into 2024. To be honest, the influence that we, the younger generation of climbers in our mid-twenties, have received from Yamada, Inoue and the rest of the Giri-Giri Boys generation is immeasurable.

Several of the original Giri-Giri Boys have tragically passed away, but the records they left behind, and the lives of those who continue to climb, are nothing short of awe-inspiring—bold, beautiful, gritty and blindingly brilliant. They are the heroes of Japanese alpine climbing. As a twenty-five-year-old climber influenced by the group, I came to feel that the complete traverse of Denali's south ridge was like unfinished business—a challenge they had left for our generation. Yamada and Inoue had attempted and failed on this massive linkup when they were the same age as us. At first I approached it with a sense of awe and fear. After strong persuasion from Takeda, however, I finally decided to make this the goal of my first real expedition. Then, with Genya, who had achieved a major climbing success in Peru the previous year, the three of us set out to follow in the footsteps of those great trailblazers.

Since I'd been living in Canada for two years, I would meet up with Takeda and Genya in Anchorage, Alaska. Just as the plane I was on began to rev its engines, ready for takeoff, a message from Takeda came through: "Emergency."

I didn't think much of it at first and casually replied, "What's up?" I assumed it was something trivial—maybe Genya had forgotten to pack extra underwear or something along those lines.

"All our gear was stolen."

"What? What do you mean?"

"All of my and Genya's gear. We couldn't check into the hotel, and when we took our eyes off it, everything was stolen."

Nearly all of their clothing, climbing gear and camping equipment was gone.

As the airplane steadily gained altitude, my excitement, which had been soaring, started to plummet. A chill ran through me, and after that, I couldn't sleep. I spent the long flight staring quietly out the window. This Alaska expedition, which Takeda and I had been planning for over two years, was off to a disastrous start.

In Anchorage, the atmosphere in the apartment we had rented for preparations was heavy. Takeda sat slumped on the sofa, looking like the world had just ended. *Takeda, did they steal your facial muscles too?* I thought.

Genya could only manage a wry smile. When I pointed the camera at him, he flipped the middle finger.

For the time being, we tried to stay upbeat, saying things like, "Well, nothing we can do about it now," while I casually searched

[Opening Spread] **Genya Takenaka simul-climbing down the ridge of East Kahiltna Peak en route to the Kahiltna Notch and the start of the Cassin Ridge on Denali, Alaska, May 2024. Much of the climbing through this section was on granular snow with very little protection.** Toranosuke Nagayama | [Facing Page] **The south face of Denali (20,310'),**

with the Kahiltna Peaks in the foreground, showing the line taken in 2008 by Tatsuro Yamada and Yuto Inoue on their attempted enchainment of the Cassin Ridge (Alaska Grade 5: 5.8 AI4 65°, 9,000'). The open circle indicates the pair's assumed highpoint. Their bodies were found at 19,800 feet in 2009. National Park Service Photo/Jeff Pflueger

for return tickets. Every flight cost over 100,000 yen (about \$650)—another steep blow. Losing the gear and having to give up the expedition was bad enough, and now we were looking at even more expenses. Trying to escape the grim reality, the three of us forced ourselves into bed that night. Before falling asleep, I posted about our situation on Facebook.

The next day, I was deeply encouraged by the outpouring of support and donations from friends in Japan who saw my post. Their messages were warm and filled with positivity, lifting our spirits. Buoyed by this support, we decided to press on. We gathered what remaining gear I had and started figuring out how we could scrape together the rest of what we needed to continue the expedition.

We held on to a faint hope that, even if we couldn't achieve our original goal, we might still be able to climb the standard West Buttress route on Denali. After filing a police report for the theft, we made our rounds through the outdoor shops in town. Takeda posted a notice at the REI store, asking anyone with information about the stolen gear to get in touch.

Then the very next day, unbelievably, Takeda started receiving a flood of encouraging emails and offers from climbers all over Alaska to lend us gear. Local climber Clint Helander immediately rushed to our lodging and left us with a lot of equipment. Dana Drummond, the owner of the secondhand outdoor shop The Hoarding Marmot, even offered to let us stay at his home until we were ready to head into the mountains.

On top of that, Dana set up his shop as a drop-off point for people across Alaska who wanted to lend us gear. Thanks to him, and to the incredible generosity of the Alaskan community, we were able to gather the equipment we needed at an unexpectedly fast pace, with almost no hassle. Additionally, I found out that my Canadian friends Jacob Dans and Zac Colbran were coming to Alaska to climb at just the right time. With the help of Japanese climbers I knew from Canada, including Takeshi Tani, Yuji Yodogawa, Aya Yodogawa, Eijiro Matsumoto and Noboru Kikuchi, we managed to gather a backpack full of gear that Jacob and Zac were able to bring to us.

We were also fortunate that Yudai Suzuki, a rising star in the climbing world, had a stash of freeze-dried rice meals stored in a locker rented from an air-taxi company—food that we were grateful to have on our summit push. Tempei Takeuchi and Shikaichi Ueki, who were returning from a ski trip in Alaska, kindly gave us their leftover food and fuel. Additionally, Yokoyama himself generously offered us the use of anything that might be left inside the Giri-Giri Boys' gear box, but sadly, the box was no longer there.

Thanks to the overwhelming support from people around the world, we managed to gather all the necessary gear. Incredibly, we were able to head to Talkeetna, where the air taxi would fly us in, with only a one-week delay from our original schedule.

"Honestly, at first I was more afraid than anything about whether we could actually continue from the Kahiltina Peaks," Takeda later said after we'd finished our acclimatization on the West Buttress. "But after our gear was stolen, so many people helped us out, and with everything that happened, it felt like we were being guided by some higher power. Now, I'm hardly afraid at all about attempting the complete traverse of Denali's south ridge."

Indeed, when I think back to that night after all our gear was



[Above] From left to right: Takenaka, Heide Provencher, Maggie the dog, Dana Drummond, Subaru Takeda and Toranosuke Nagayama before the team set off for the Alaska Range. Drummond lodged the climbers and helped them borrow gear after much of theirs was stolen. Toranosuke Nagayama collection | [Right] Takenaka rappels on the traverse to the Kahiltina Notch and the Cassin Ridge. The footprints leading ahead are from Takeda, who rappelled first and continued on to set the next anchor. Toranosuke Nagayama

stolen, the way things turned around felt nothing short of miraculous. All of Takeda's clothing had been borrowed from climbers in Alaska, and every piece of Genya's clothing had been loaned by Takeshi Tani. Their ice axes, boots and harnesses were all borrowed as well. In the truest sense of the word, we were standing on the glacier supported by the generosity of others.

AFTER COMPLETING OUR acclimatization from the West Buttress to the summit of Denali, we returned to Camp I. There, we rested and scouted the approach to the Kahiltina Peaks, making our final preparations.

According to a report by the Taniguchi-Hanatani pair, they seemed to have started from a couloir somewhere along the ridge extending toward the East Fork. However, we decided to begin our ascent via the West Ridge, which stood right in front of us at Camp I, with a vertical rise of about 5,000 feet. This route had the least risk of overhead seracs, and, more than anything, the ridge itself was the most beautiful and enticing. Though the ridge appeared complex in parts, we knew it wasn't impossible, as there was a record of an Italian team climbing from that ridge to the west summit of the Kahiltina Peaks in 2011.

On May 25, we left Camp I and began our ascent of the ridge. The route was incredibly diverse and satisfying, featuring snow ridges, rock ridges, ice climbing and, to top it off, some good old-fashioned snow-plowing. We simulclimbed almost the entire ridge, and after thirteen hours we reached the summit of West Kahiltina Peak (12,835'), where we set up camp. At this point, we were moving significantly faster than the pace set by the Taniguchi-Hanatani pair, making us realize just how favorable the conditions were. It truly felt like the heavens were on our side as we faced the long crux ridge that stretched all the way to the Kahiltina Notch, just before the Cassin.

For the next three days, we navigated the crux section leading up





If we didn't
make the
optimal
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and down to the notch. The ridge was narrow and complex, and the snow conditions varied widely, so it took us a significant amount of time to pass through. The eerie, descending knife-edge ridge felt more like an ice ridge than snow. We had to traverse and down climb near-vertical, rock-hard glacier ice close to eighty degrees, as well as traverse sun-rotted snow walls where no solid protection could be placed. There were rappels using Abalakov anchors, and even descents anchored by sandbags that we filled with snow and buried. It demanded an incredibly diverse set of techniques.

We had to quickly assess which slope, either the west or the east, had better snow conditions, whether to simulclimb or pitch it out, down climb or rappel. If we didn't make the optimal decision in each moment, it would cost us an enormous amount of time. Though not technically difficult, the route tested our overall mountaineering skills and patience.

We used every skill we had learned up to that point. After about

thirteen hours of climbing each day, we finally reached the notch on the fourth day.

From there, the 9,000-foot Cassin Ridge (Alaska Grade 5: 5.8 AI4 65°) loomed above us. But our spirits were light. We had completed the mostly uncharted traverse of the Kahiltna Peaks. All that remained was the world-famous, ultra-classic ridge. There was plenty of information on it, and it felt like we were finally about to enjoy the long-awaited dessert at the end of a hard-earned meal.

But things didn't go as smoothly as we had hoped. By the fifth day, exhaustion and the pressure of being on such a massive mountain began to wear on us. Mistakes that we wouldn't normally make started to happen more often. We dropped two of our belay-rappel devices, leaving us with just one for the Cassin.

Up until that point, the atmosphere between the three of us had been great, with no arguments at all. But now, for the first time, we grew frustrated with one other's mistakes and the slow pace of our

I began to reflect on the choices we had made.
Perhaps the decision to climb at night was
a mistake.





progress. The stress gradually built up.

Of course, we knew all too well that a climbing party under stress is dangerous, so we made sure to stop and talk things through at key points, refocusing and working to relieve tension as much as possible. We carefully gained altitude, always mindful that small mistakes could lead to serious accidents.

On the eighth day, we set up our tent at a comfortable spot at around 17,000 feet, above the third rockband. We had already climbed through the technically difficult sections, and all that remained was the final push to Denali's summit.

AFTER EIGHT STRAIGHT DAYS of movement, with our only rest at bivouacs where we could barely lie down properly, we were fully aware of just how exhausted we had become.

With the summit practically in sight, I may have been more tense than ever before. I couldn't help but think about Yamada and Inoue, who disappeared on the stretch we were about to climb. Even though the final ridge ahead of us was likely the easiest section of the entire route, I couldn't afford to let my guard down.

On the ninth day, with a storm in the forecast, we happily took the entire day to rest. Even stepping out of the tent to use the bathroom felt like a hassle. During dinner, we checked the weather again: it was expected to clear up that night through the next morning, but another storm was forecast to hit that afternoon and last for several days. With that in mind, we decided to make our summit push during the night and finish by morning to avoid being caught in the next storm. To pass the time, we played Daifugō (the Japanese card game Rich Man, Poor Man). To our surprise, it turned into a thrillingly close match and we all got really into it. The team's mood was great and the rest day allowed us to regain a lot of strength. Thinking about summiting the next day, we lay down to get some sleep before our planned 1 a.m. wake-up call. But I was so eager that I couldn't sleep.

When we set off at 1 a.m., the sky was clear, the temperature was low and the wind was fierce. I felt a bit uneasy, but more than anything I was excited about the summit that lay ahead, even though we were suffering from the biting cold of Alaska. I kept repeating a line I'd heard somewhere before as I climbed: "Cold body, but a hot spirit!"

As the never-setting sun slowly began to rise again, the skyline above us glowed golden in the morning light.

"We're almost at the summit!" I shouted excitedly, unable to contain myself. But just as I was about to keep moving, I glanced back and saw Genya leaning against a rock, breathing shallowly. It was clear that something was wrong.

Genya had developed symptoms of hypothermia, making it impossible for him to continue. We carved out a space in the snow behind a rock to set up the tent and warmed him up. We boiled water and fed him freeze-dried rice. All we could do was wait and hope that he would recover enough to walk again under his own power. It was 5 a.m. and we were now bivouacked about 500 feet

[Photo] **Takeda leads the traverse down East Kahiltna Peak toward the Kahiltna Notch with Takenaka following. Denali is in the background.** Toranosuke Nagayama

below Kahiltna Horn and perhaps 700 feet beneath the summit. Our tent was half suspended in the air, and we were wrapped in our sleeping bags, still wearing our boots to keep warm.

I began to reflect on the choices we had made. Perhaps the decision to climb at night was a mistake. We'd never attempted a night push above 19,000 feet before, and maybe that was what had led to this situation. Getting caught up in the idea of standing on the summit at sunrise—a dramatic and stylish finish—was likely a poor judgment call. Come to think of it, we could have conserved more energy while climbing the Cassin Ridge, pacing ourselves better. All along, Genya had visibly shown more fatigue than the rest of us. I could have paid more attention to him, been more considerate. But the pressure of being on such a massive mountain had weighed heavily on me; ever since we completed the Kahiltna traverse and started up the Cassin Ridge, I had felt like I was walking a tightrope.

Perhaps that rope is finally about to snap, I thought.

As I reflected on this, even though Genya was in a serious condition, I found myself more concerned about my own safety. I even muttered, "Genya's going to kill me." Takeda surely remembers that moment, too.

There was no certainty that Genya would be able to walk on his own again. If he couldn't, we wouldn't even make it to Kahiltna Horn, and without climbing those final 500 feet, we couldn't begin our descent. By this point, my primary goal had shifted to ensuring that the three of us got down safely. I kept telling myself: *We must not follow too closely in the footsteps of Yamada and Inoue.*

I reminded myself to stay calm. When the sun hit us around 10 a.m. it would warm us up and improve our situation. *Don't rush,* I thought.

But the sun never hit us. The temperature didn't rise as expected. When I peeked outside the tent, everything was completely white, and the wind was howling. The golden summit that had been visible earlier was now gone. The weather forecast had turned against us. Up until this point, even when the forecast was wrong, it had usually worked out in our favor. Now I knew this wouldn't be easy, and I steel myself for what was ahead.

At 10 a.m., after a five-hour bivouac, Genya began walking again. He was truly incredible—I was amazed that he managed to walk on his own all the way to the end. But his steps were still shaky, and his pace remained slow. In the end, it took us two hours to cover the remaining distance to Kahiltna Horn.

Standing on Kahiltna Horn, I looked at the ridgeline upward, battered by wind and snow. *If we die, it'll be here,* my gut instinct screamed. Yamada and Inoue flashed through my mind. No matter how easy that ridge seemed, if any one of us stumbled or lost our footing, we'd fall thousands of feet. Even the most experienced climbers can die from a simple mistake. *This is how Yamada and Inoue must have died,* I thought. The image stuck with me, and I couldn't shake it.

"We're absolutely not going to the summit! We're descending the West Buttress immediately!" I shouted.

"We haven't given it everything yet!" Takeda shouted back. "Let's pitch the tent here, rest for a while and aim for the summit! We can stay overnight and go for it tomorrow! We've got

[Facing Page] **Takenaka follows a pitch on the Cassin Ridge. The long ridge of the Kahiltna Peaks, which they traversed to reach this point, trails off to the southwest with Mt. Foraker (Soft'aanh, 17,400') in the distance.** Toranosuke Nagayama

fuel and food!" His face was blurred by the swirling snow, hard to make out. His voice had a hint of a sob to it. I understood what he was saying. But the forecast showed the weather worsening, and I couldn't gauge how much risk it would pose for Genya, who had already experienced hypothermia, to spend a night at this altitude. We couldn't afford to make another mistake. We had to head back immediately, safely, and get to a secure zone. Even the descent had long sections of exposed traverses where a single slip could be fatal.

"I'm sorry, I can't go any farther. Let's go down," Genya said.

That one sentence was the trigger. Even though Takeda wasn't fully convinced, I started pulling him down with the rope that tied us together, forcing the descent.

"We've come this far! We've come all this way!" he shouted, his voice guttural, like it was being torn from his core.

TAKEDA, GENYA AND I didn't set out just to climb the Cassin Ridge, nor simply to traverse the Kahiltna Peaks. We aimed to connect that single, beautiful line stretching south from the summit of Denali. We wanted to embrace every part of this mountain, from end to end. But we came up a few hundred feet short, missing something we couldn't quite grasp. There was no choice but to accept that.

Even so, this climb was by no means pointless. We managed to connect to our own future through this experience. Maybe if we had pushed on we would have reached the summit without any issues and returned safely. But there was a real possibility that one of us could have slipped, and all three of us might have never made it back.

Yamada was twenty-seven, Inoue twenty-four. Had they lived, they would have encountered many more beautiful mountains and accomplished great climbs. But they didn't. Death severed that future. It's a heartbreaking truth. Death may have cut off their future, but the passion they showed through their footsteps was certainly passed on to us.

We descended the mountain carrying the hopes and support of so many people—our friends from Japan, our friends from Canada and the kind people of Alaska—all of whom had helped us along the way.

More than anything, we had to return all the gear we borrowed. We had to come back alive, hand it back to them and say, "Thanks for lending us the gear! Man, what a rough start we had! Haha." We had to turn it into a story to laugh about.

On that note, the name I gave our expedition team was BIBIRI—an onomatopoeic expression for a feeling that roughly translates to "scaredy-cats." The original idea was BIBIRI Boys, but I figured we didn't all need to be "boys," so I settled on BIBIRI. The name has a bit of an odd ring to it—maybe "Team BIBIRI" would've sounded better.

We will carry this experience forward into the next exciting climb. Because only by continuing to climb will we ever know what that view looks like from those 200 feet above.

—Translated from the Japanese by Kei Tsuda





The
Edge
of

Entropy

TOM LIVINGSTONE

The first ascent
of Gasherbrum III's
west ridge



Chopping a ledge in the snow at 7800 meters, Aleš Česen and I croaked and grunted to each other. *How long had I been cutting the slope for? What is five times five?* I could barely think. When I got inside the tent, the outer edge of the platform collapsed. **“Huh. This won’t work,” Aleš said bluntly.** So we sat on the ledge in our double sleeping bag, drifting weirdly in and out of sleep. The tent, draped over us, flapped noisily as the wind played. Then fat snowflakes fell, coating the bag we shared and melting down to our skin. **“Very bad,”** we agreed, neatly summarizing our shit-outta-luck situation.



My teeth chattered. Thoughts were as clear as my frosted sunglasses. Later, when I recalled this moment, I concluded that alpinism is such a beautiful trap between what you want and what you need. Although I wasn't enjoying this experience, starving for warmth and oxygen-rich air, strangely, it was exactly where I wanted to be. What we were feeling was obsession.

ONE OBVIOUS WAY to make alpinism challenging is to climb both as hard and as high as possible.

For Aleš and me, Gasherbrum III (7958m) was a question: What if you took the technical difficulty of routes found on peaks in the Alps, Alaska or the Canadian Rockies and supercharged the challenge by attempting that type of terrain at high altitude, say, 8000 meters? Of course, you couldn't perform to the same standard—but that would be a real beast. In 2022, when Aleš first suggested that we attempt the first ascent of the west ridge on Gasherbrum III, my mind flashed like a spark in the dark. Altitude is a destroyer, but I wanted to play with fire up high.

Some inspiring examples include the French route on the south face of Nuptse in 2017, the Czech route on Gasherbrum I in 2017, the Ukrainian route on Annapurna III in 2021 and the American route on Jannu's north face in 2023. Those ascents were all in a similar vein:

small, alpine-style teams aiming to climb free and high. Although such ascents rarely work out perfectly, the pursuit of a faraway summit with an unknown outcome always interests me.

Over the last six years, I've regularly climbed in Pakistan, India and Nepal at around 6000 to 7200 meters. Long before, as a teenager, I first learned to put on my harness at the crumbly seacliffs of southern England. I had the foresight to understand the importance of progressing carefully and slowly. I dutifully served an apprenticeship, starting with a winter season in the European Alps in 2010 at age nineteen. The short days (and long, cold nights) were full of learning, and my understanding constantly expanded. At the beginning, I knew so little about alpinism (or the effects of alcohol). Every route, every day, I encountered new skills and beliefs. Icy gullies like the Supercouloir on Mont Blanc du Tacul could be ascended fast—with the right experience. The north face of a jagged granite peak like the Tour Ronde doesn't have to be extreme. Winter alpinism could be managed with attention and equipment.

Chancing upon Mark Twight's book *Extreme Alpinism* that same year was transformational. I was immediately impressed and enthralled. The stories and photos within those enlightening pages showed me a whole world that existed beyond my level. Twight's words "The mind rules the body" are very true in alpinism. Bold, brightly

[Opening Spread] **Tom Livingstone climbing through the bottom of an icefall on the second day of the approach from base camp to access the west ridge of Gasherbrum III (7958m). Camp I was at 6000 meters and the base of the ridge starts at 7000 meters.**

After climbing through this section, Livingstone and Aleš Česen were able to skirt the "nasty-looking ice field" on the right. Gasherbrum IV is in the background. Aleš Česen | [This Page] **Česen following up the ice field on day two.** Tom Livingstone



colored climbers using straight axes and wearing headbands visited distant peaks, their attitudes full of energy with tales from the edge. I clearly understood that it was somewhere I wanted to be.

Standing at this point in time and looking back some twenty years, I see a constant thread: climbing has influenced the most basic choices in my life; it is part of who I am. I feel a desire for more—more pitches, difficulty, altitude. I enjoy rock climbing—bearing down on textured crimps on an overhanging wave of limestone—as much as the satisfying *thunk* of swinging an ice axe in the mountains. Combining all my abilities to reach a summit always entices me.

My first trip to Pakistan was in 2018 with Aleš and Luka Stražar. Our partnership clicked perfectly, and we laughed together as we climbed Latok I (7145m). They imparted many lessons to me, covering topics like “the art of suffering” and “how to look like a tough Slovenian.” By this point, I had journeyed through the world I’d first read about as a teenager and felt ready for an experience like the North Ridge of Latok. When Aleš, Luka and I touched back down onto the glacier after seven sleepless days, we had formed a bond of trust and admiration. We keep in contact and climb together whenever we can.

Subsequent expeditions progressed toward climbing a technical route at high altitude. In 2019, Ally Swinton and I shared some of the richest days I’ve ever had when we journeyed up Koyo Zom (6872m) in Pakistan’s Hindu Raj. On our third day, at around 6300 meters, I wiggled my bare feet into rock shoes and quested up an overhanging granite headwall, more reminiscent of seacliff climbing at Gogarth in North Wales. It was the first time I’d climbed steep, three-dimensional pitches of E4 (5.11+) with 1000 meters of air beneath me, and only mountains fading into the horizon.

By 2022, approximately twenty-six smaller “trips” or expeditions had passed since my first days in the Alps. As rewarding and demanding as those experiences were, the high-altitude goal growled in my mind like a bear poked with a stick.

As an objective, Gasherbrum III’s unclimbed west ridge appeared to be quite sensible. Since it’s a ridge, it would be safer from falling seracs and avalanches, and it would offer technical climbing that looked tricky but not too hard. Plus, the descent *should* be relatively smooth—down the popular normal route of neighboring Gasherbrum II (8034m). A bonus was that GIII is composed of granite, unlike many of the other Gasherbrum peaks, which are chossy limestone and marble. In short, it looked psycho—but not too psycho! So, when Aleš proposed the idea in April 2022, I replied with my usual overstroke: “YES.”

I TRUST ALEŠ COMPLETELY and we work well together. Over three big expeditions, I don’t think we’ve ever exchanged a bad word. Despite his stern exterior and tough Slovenian reputation, he’s very warm and open.

At our Gasherbrum base camp in August 2022, we spent hours pushing the biggest rocks we could find into crevasses, fascinated with childish delight. “Oooh!” we giggled each time a boulder thumped into the blue void. Alternatively, we would reminisce about home by eating *špek* (Slovenian cured meat) with hot sauce.

That year’s attempt on GIII explored the balance between desire

and rationality. We found ourselves at the base of the west ridge, our tent shaken by winds that literally created a ripping sound as they tore over the mountain. “You’d be blown over the border and into China,” we agreed grimly. Rationality prevailed, and we “bravely ran away” to the northern aspect, hoping for shelter, but finding little.

A few days later, at 7600 meters, we hit a compact, steep tower about 100 meters high. It stood like a sentry, halting our progress.

“I think we’re fucked!” Aleš shouted into the wind.

We were completely undergunned to climb farther. It was more reminiscent of the northeast pillar of Teng Kangpoche, a 6487-meter peak in Nepal I had climbed a few months earlier with Matt Glenn that had required seven days and lots of aid.

Several days later we were back in base camp, with wide eyes and reddened cheeks. Aleš and I had gained more knowledge about what the altitude felt like, what clothes to wear and which systems worked well. This experience also solidified our desire to climb the west ridge. I filled my journal with lessons from the trip: “Take three pairs of gloves; stretch every evening to avoid cramps; make the lightest gear even lighter,” and so on.

IN 2024 WE returned to Pakistan for a rematch. We understood that we would only get one shot to climb the mountain. After that, we would be so wasted by the altitude that we wouldn’t have the fitness or the enthusiasm to try again. We had to choose our moment carefully. Besides that, it would also take time to acclimatize well, which would involve spending at least one night at 7000 meters. Since our base camp was on a rocky moraine at 5000 meters, physical recovery was much slower. With all that taken into account, we budgeted two months to give ourselves the best chance of success. This was the first time either of us had returned to make another attempt at the same objective. Normally we are both too curious to see new sights.

We were inspired by Scotsmen Geoff Cohen and Des Rubens, who attempted the west ridge in 1985. On their second day of climbing, they reached approximately 7700 meters. The pair had left their bivy kit lower on the ridge, hoping to summit and return the same day, but the climb was far bigger than they’d expected. In strong winds and inclement weather, risking frostbite, they decided to bail. In February 2022, Geoff sent us his expedition report, photos and motivation. “Delighted to hear that you are planning to try the SW ridge of GIII!” he replied to my initial email. Although he wrote of the deterioration of Pakistan’s wilderness due to tourism, I wistfully imagined his journey into the mountains: eleven days of walking, without internet or outside communication.

Geoff’s report was full of interesting quotes that I was curious to interpret firsthand: *After a steep pitch we ... found deep*

IT’S LIKE
8000-METER
MINI GOLF:
KEEP GOING
'ROUND UNTIL
YOU LOSE
YOUR BALLS?
I THOUGHT.

[This Page] Česen (left) and Livingstone at a bivy, knackered and feeling the thin air but still smiling. | [Facing Page] Česen climbing through poor conditions on summit day. "The snow was shit that constantly collapsed," says Livingstone. "The spindrift made it feel like Scotland, though." Tom Livingstone (both)



powder snow over rather holdless slabs.... All the while the wind was extremely fierce and blew painful spindrift into our eyes....

With commendable perseverance Des produced a brew ... and as I lay listening to the savage battering of the wind on my bag I began to think we would have to descend....

The climbing ahead was still difficult ... the choice of best route was not at all obvious.

Their decision to descend was sensible, considering the poor weather and the difficulties of the route. Without bivouac equipment they risked a dangerous night, and it's better to retreat than risk frostbite, injury or worse.

Geoff's emails gave me more hope, however. "I've been keeping a very vague eye on climbing news over the last 40+ years, wondering if anyone else would follow our footsteps," he wrote. "Good luck wherever you go!!"

PAKISTAN'S NORTHERN REGION of Gilgit-Baltistan is a joy of senses, a land drifting through time in which the turn of a shovel seems more common than the grate of an engine. In the remote mountain village of Askole, the last permanent civilization before the Baltoro Valley, I followed dusty trails between potato fields. There was a heavy aroma of something that smelled like thyme in the air. Men's dark stares cracked into toothy smiles, and women were wrapped in colorful shawls. A call to prayer rose into the soft evening as the peaks on the horizon swallowed the sun for another night.

Visiting for our sixth time, Aleš and I had learned to roll with the inevitable hiccups. On this trip, Aleš had problems with his visa, and unexpected (but friendly) teams randomly joined our base camp.

After walking 112 kilometers up the Baltoro Valley over six days, we reached the Gasherbrum base camp. Then, during three weeks of mixed weather, we made three trips part of the way up the normal route

of GII. This mountain is just over 8000 meters, so it sees a steady train of suitors attempting it every year. In 2022 and 2024, I counted the people I met who were going for GI and GII, with the number circling around forty. Though there are some exceptions, most climbers jumared fixed ropes, which are installed and apparently abandoned every season. They have support from high-altitude expedition workers, plus a track in the snow and tents in place. Some use bottled oxygen from as low as 6500 meters. "Good effort," I say to these teams, though they're a universe apart from our practice of alpinism. Of course, Aleš and I did not use any of the aforementioned assistance, and eventually we spent a night at 7000 meters camped among the other teams.

Unfortunately, after this night up high, Aleš became very dizzy. We suspected the problem was related to the balance in his inner ear. We searched for medicine while his experience on a "constant roller coaster," as he called it, settled. Aleš recovered slowly but I had faith in him. Offering my full support, I was actually excited when he asked me to inject him with drugs that we'd acquired from an amateur doctor at a nearby military camp. (Aleš messaged his girlfriend via inReach to research the medication, and we concluded that it probably wouldn't do anything but wouldn't hurt either.) I'd never injected anyone before—only an orange in a first aid course.

To pass the time we watched films on our tablets. Eventually we were quoting from *Inglourious Basterds*: "Hugo Stiglitz?... These are the Basterds!" There was a pleasant scene in base camp thanks to neighboring Austrian climbers and American skiers. We made a pull-up bar on the rubbish-dump moraine and trained by picking up rocks. I solved Sudoku puzzles (sometimes even without Aleš's help).

Since our arrival in the area, westerly winds had always blown strongly over the summit of Gasherbrum I, our high-altitude weather vane. While Aleš





recovered, we saw the winds switch somewhat to the north, indicating that a settled window was passing. After seven slow days, Aleš had mostly recovered, although we had still not found useful medication. We were both worried—what would happen if his dizziness returned at altitude? By this point the weather returned to an unsettled pattern; the skies were now speckled and obtuse again. I was eager, so we decided to use our one shot at GIII, despite some disturbance showing on the distant forecast.

Minimalism was as important as self-belief and “the art of freedom,” to quote the famous Polish alpinist Voytek Kurtyka. We could only take the essentials, and then make everything as light as possible. We brought a double sleeping bag; clothing that would be just warm enough; a Dyneema tent; a basic supply of food and gas; the lightest nuts, cams and carabiners, and so on. Then we mentally prepared ourselves to suffer and enjoy, to be tested and pass, to be scared and laugh. We wanted to experience all of these feelings, voluntarily, and to keep climbing in spite of them. To be free to choose pain, or laughter—isn’t that the ultimate freedom?

FROM BASE CAMP you walk through an icefall, which is about as fun as it sounds, and jump over some crevasses to reach Camp I at 6000 meters. This is in the middle of the Gasherbrum cirque, and six peaks surround you like nightmarish monsters of meringue. *It’s like 8000-meter mini golf: keep going ’round until you lose your balls?* I thought. From here, almost all teams go for the normal routes of GI or GII.

On our second day, we ascended a long ice field from Camp I to a col between GIV and GIII and camped at around 7000 meters at the base of GIII’s west ridge. With packs weighing about twelve kilograms (twenty-seven pounds), we smiled more but spoke less. Our throats felt like we’d swallowed a bag of razors, ragged from dehydration and the altitude.

When we started up the west ridge the following morning, we were surprised to find a rope coiled at the base. The Scots had left it after their attempt in 1985. Geoff had written about it: “At the top of the ramp I neatly coiled and laid to rest Paul’s 7-millimeter rope that had served us well.” I wondered about his words, “laid to rest,” and hoped we wouldn’t return to this place again.

It felt good to finally be climbing after so much time spent at base camp and acclimatizing! Although any movement required heavy breathing, we enjoyed steep rocky pitches and some snowy mixed ground when we weren't shivering on longer belays.

Sometimes we tiptoed up run-out slabs, our crampons delicately placed onto flat edges. Other times, we rode dinosaur-spine arêtes, exchanging the lead whenever the other slowed. When there was gear, we happily stuffed cams into granite cracks. By evening we had made a three-star bivy on some rocks at around 7500 meters (five stars means you're lying down; one star is hanging in your harness). As good as our progress was, our brains were clearly being affected by the altitude. Not wanting to sacrifice hard-earned elevation, we ignored a spacious platform about thirty meters below. Instead, we convinced ourselves—thanks to my overoptimism—that this sloping, shitty ledge would suffice.

For breakfast on the fourth day (our second day of real climbing), we launched onto the upper ridge. "*Gremo!*" we said in Slovenian. "Let's go!"

Through snowfall and blustery winds, we tried to keep moving, thrutching through chimneys and tack-tacking our ice axes and crampons up gullies. The granite reared up, becoming steeper, leaving us panting with each difficult move. Occasional views of the glaciers, lying far below like fat white tongues, pressed into us

the exposure and isolation. China's wild, mysterious lands spread to the north, although I hardly cared, I was so gassed.

A headwall rose from the end of the ridge; the summit was hiding just beyond. *Perhaps we can actually climb this mountain?* I dared to dream. Although it was probably only about five pitches high, the wall looked quite sheer and intimidating. It was late afternoon, and at 7800 meters, it was clear we should bivy. Which is how I came to find myself next to Aleš with the tent draped over us, teeth chattering, struggling to solve basic math.

In the faint morning light of our fifth day out from base camp, our third climbing day, without much discussion, we traversed to the left to skirt around the headwall. In hindsight, we might have taken the harder, longer route.

Long sections of rock slabs were covered in twenty centimeters of unconsolidated snow, in which our crampons and axes would suddenly slip every so often. At first I was terrified of falling; then I stopped thinking. I was a cat with its claws out, occasionally sliding helplessly down a pane of glass. In my oxygen-depleted brain these slips became "tips," presumably because it rhymed.

I took occasional micro-naps at belays, looking up to see Aleš only a few meters higher. I'm sure he did the same. The speed at which we climbed was almost laughable.

[Photo] Česen on the summit of GIII. This was only the third ascent of the peak. "Although it's 7952 meters on the few maps we found, our two inReach devices and GPS watch recorded it as 7958 meters," Livingstone says. "I felt every meter!" Tom Livingstone



“IF I SUGGEST
GOING ON A
HIGH-ALTITUDE
EXPEDITION
NEXT YEAR,
BREAK MY
ANKLES!”
ALEŠ SAID.

Despite the sections of deep collapsing snow that consumed time and energy, there were several great pitches of climbing. The final rockband at 7900 meters was a memorable crux: a twenty-meter pitch with no gear and some awkward, delicate climbing that entailed some brilliant stemming moves, where I smeared the points of my crampons against blank walls, calves screaming, as my axes slotted into the corner. The middle of the pitch steepened, but we had no choice; it had to be done. I could only guess about the grade—*was it M6?*

“I don’t know how you climbed that—I wouldn’t have been able to do it,” Aleš said when he followed.

Slogging to the summit, finally on easy terrain, we simply breathed and tried to keep taking another step. If we’d taken turns standing on each other’s shoulders, we could have practically touched the hallowed air of 8000 meters. It was a real relief to reach the top, but what strong emotions did we feel? Exactly nothing. Our two inReach devices and watch recorded 7958 meters.

Thankfully Aleš’s dizziness had not returned. Like with every substantial objective, I’d had low expectations and had harbored doubts about whether this climb was even possible. Of course, luck had been on our side. We had felt relatively in control all the way up. We also felt so far away from safety, civilization or any concept of “life.”

In search of thicker air, and to avoid my saying something extravagant about our situation, we quickly started abseiling down the east side of the mountain. This was the line of the only two previous ascents of GIII.

When the Polish team of Wanda Rutkiewicz, Alison Chadwick-Onyszkiewicz, Janusz Onyszkiewicz and Krzysztof Zdżitowiecki became the first people to stand on top in 1975, GIII had been the highest unclimbed peak on the planet. Even more remarkable is that, as Owen Clarke observed in a story for Climbing.com, Gasherbrum III is “the highest peak on which women have participated in a first ascent.” The second ascent was accomplished in 2004 by the Spanish team of Alberto Iñurategi, Jon Beloki and Jose Carlos Tamayo, with only Iñurategi and Beloki standing on top.

On our first of about ten rappels, our Beal Escaper—a

specialized lanyard that enables full-length, single-rope rappels—didn’t release our one 7.7-millimeter rope (“Shit!”) and Aleš re-climbed the distance to sort it.

Late that night, we trudged over to the normal route of GII, to the well-used campsite at 7400 meters. Even though it only amounted to discarded rubbish, it was pleasing to see signs of other people again. Still wearing my headtorch, I sank into a few hours of oblivious sleep with Aleš.

In the pale morning we zipped down the fixed lines of GII’s normal route. Stylistically, it would have been preferable to have descended under our own steam, without the option of these fixed ropes. It was contrived to ignore them, however, so down we went to Camp I.

Finally, on our seventh day, we cruised down to base camp. I could almost taste the warm croissants from my local bakery. We stuffed our hollow cheeks with the next best thing: omelets and chapatis. Our experience had been fulfilling, but we’d seen enough of the Gasherbrum area for now.

“If I suggest going on a high-altitude expedition next year, break my ankles!” Aleš said.

BACK IN ISLAMABAD and with slugged, knackered legs, we discussed our journey. We were very satisfied to have realized a long-term goal of climbing a technical route on an almost-8000-meter mountain, to go “free and high.” I guess I still haven’t properly realized this objective. Some say Gasherbrum III is the fifteenth-highest peak in the world, depending on prominence. Despite our unimpressive photos, my memory is full—with both pleasant and not-so-pleasant times—and my flame has dimmed to a contented glow, though it still burns.

Achieving such an objective does, of course, make me wonder what else I could climb, and there are always ideas of “next ...?” But as Aleš said, a pause is needed first.

Although we usually avoid naming or grading our new routes, on this occasion we floated ideas between steaming plates of dhal and rice.

“I read about entropy on this trip, and the route follows an arête or edge ...” I mentioned. Aleš’s eyes lit up as he recalled his five years working in physics for his PhD in civil engineering. “Entropy is a measure of chaos,” he explained. “Both our minds were growing more and more chaotic as we climbed, and so was the quality of the rock, the route finding, everything. In physics, entropy is a measurement that can only rise. It will never decrease ... at least until the summit.” ■



WIRED

Contours of Identity | Shara Zaia

IN ONE OF MY earliest memories, I am sitting in an elementary school classroom with my best friend Claire as she traces the contours of my face. “You have a mountain nose. Mine is a ski slope,” she said.

My nose was a distinctive characteristic that I inherited from my Assyrian bloodline. Growing up siloed from any large Middle Eastern population, I didn’t see many people with features like mine. Perhaps if I had, I would have felt more pride. As I’ve grown up, I’ve come to appreciate the rich legacy of suffering and resilience that my people endured. The ancient Assyrian Empire arose from Mesopotamia, one of the cradles of civilization, and at its height, between 900 and 600 BCE, it encompassed a vast region that included modern-day Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria. The descendants of the Assyrian Empire have all but been erased after millennia of empires dueling for control of the Fertile Crescent. In the twentieth century, following approximately eighty years of escalating violence, the Assyrian genocide between 1914 and 1920, also known as the Sayfo, led to the loss of countless lives and the destruction of communities, further scattering my forebears across the globe.

We are still struggling to fit in. Until March 2024, the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) communities had been labeled by the US federal government as “white,” a classification that stemmed from broad and oversimplified racial categorizations that failed to acknowledge the rich cultural, historical and ethnic complexities of Middle Eastern peoples. For Assyrians, this “white” label has overlooked our distinct ethnic identity, language (Syriac/Aramaic) and traditions that are markedly different from those typically associated with whiteness in a Western context. Moreover, this



type of misclassification can render the specific challenges and discrimination faced by Assyrians invisible, as it does not account for the nuances of their experience as an ethnic minority with a history of persecution and genocide.

My parents were born in Habbaniyah, Iraq, where they faced significant persecution for their ethnicity. Their journey to safety was through education, earning advanced degrees in pharmacy and neonatology. That eventually led them to immigrate to the United States, passing through England and Italy along the way. They found a new home in the vibrant Assyrian community in Chicago, Illinois. After the birth of my older sister, Shana, they found work at the Cleveland Clinic. It was there in Ohio that my older brother, Eddy, and I were born, marking the beginning of our family’s new chapter. In the liminal space between Assyrian and American, I learned to

navigate the currents of two identities, neither of which was mine, yet both shaped me.

Childhood was a canvas painted with both vibrant hues and dark shadows. My lighter skin afforded me some privilege, but other features marked me as “other”—a nose too pronounced, hair too wild, an endangered language that tasted of exile. Exposed by my features, I internalized the implicit and explicit messages about Middle Eastern people in a post-9/11 society—that they are angry and violent, that they are terrorists. It started with microaggressions, questions like “What are you?” and “Where are you really from?”—as if my essence could be summed up with a single word. When the world tilted on its axis on that September day in 2001, I became the face of a distant terror, a scapegoat for fear. Soon the questions evolved into sharp and derogatory insults like “towelhead” and “terrorist.” In

my desperation for inclusion, I found myself laughing along with their ridicule. That is, until one particularly hot day in 2011 at the Indy 500 car race in Indianapolis, Indiana.

“Go back to your country, terrorist!” a stranger spat, pouring his beer over me as his eyes surveyed my Middle Eastern features in disgust. Budweiser dripped down my cheeks and onto my American flag T-shirt as cars roared by on the circular track. Horrified, I did not even tell my friends, dismissing it like it was nothing. Once again, the roots of internalized shame surrounding my identity deepened.

Avoiding assimilation in America can feel like trying to stay dry while living in the ocean. It’s no secret that the tides in this country do not always flow in a direction that serves the whole population. For underrepresented communities, the dilemma is stark: either drift with the current, losing oneself in the process, or

[Facing Page] **Shara Zaia extends for a pocket on Creedmoor Sharps (5.13b), a route established by Todd Skinner in 2000 in Wyoming’s Bighorn Mountains. “I love when people share about sending their projects because I know how much time and effort**

went into reaching that goal,” Zaia wrote in a 2021 Instagram post. Max Haimowitz, Desert Trip Productions | [This Page] **Snapshots of the Zaia family as a first-generation household of Assyrian Americans living in Ohio during the 1990s.** Shara Zaia collection

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[Photo] **Zaia wears her traditional Assyrian dress in the fading light of a Wyoming sunset in the Bighorn Mountains.** Max Haimowitz, Desert Trip Productions

fight against the tide, enduring the relentless struggle for identity and safety. To protect myself, I became vigilant about blending in.

Unfortunately, hiding your feelings does not stop the emotions from growing. Reinforced by media and societal influences, I could never escape the comparisons to Eurocentric ideals. After graduating university with a degree in early and middle childhood education, I began a decade-long career as an early educator. In 2009, I was hired at my first teaching job at an arts-integrated school in Kokomo, Indiana. Even my students, innocent to their impact, commented on my features: “Miss Zaia, are you a witch? You have a witch nose.”

In 2012, the compounding pain and rejection crushed me and I attempted to take my own life. My heavy eyelids peeled apart slowly, burning as I desperately blinked away the glaring fluorescent lights above me. *Where am I?* I blinked again, taking in the scene around me. My fingers twitched, grazing a hospital gown covering my tired body. I let my eyes close, hoping to stop the memories from returning. But against the backs of my eyelids, the images played vividly: the note, the pills, the empty bottle of cheap vodka.

I knew something had to give. Trying to change others proved futile, so I decided to transform myself. Before long, it was 2015 and I was back in a hospital gown. This time, it was for ethnic rhinoplasty—an elective surgery that many Middle Eastern people pursue. The Rhinology Research Society of Iran and Johns Hopkins University in the US conducted a study that concluded that, at about 200,000 surgeries per year, the rhinoplasty rate in Iran is seven times that in America. I realized that my experience was not an outlier. Eurocentric beauty standards had woven themselves into the fabric of modern Middle Eastern societies across the world.

IT WAS NOT UNTIL I moved to Colorado in 2018 that the tide began to turn for my mental health. My journey had been riddled with self-doubt and crippling imposter syndrome. I found myself turning down new opportunities, masking my fear of failure and reinforcing my sense of not belonging. I avoided public speaking, promotions and self-advocacy, and dreaded

any situation where rejection might loom. So, when two friends invited me to a climbing gym in 2019, I was apprehensive and braced for the familiar sting of being an outsider.

Yet, to my surprise, I found a natural affinity for climbing. On the wall, I found a space where societal norms or expectations did not restrict my body’s movements. Soon, my friends took me outside to Clear Creek Canyon and encouraged me to lead my first route on real rock. The rock face presented an equal challenge to all who dared to tie in. This impartiality in the act of climbing was liberating. With each grip and foothold, I was not just moving upward but also shedding layers of internalized doubt and fear. It required a level of focus and presence that left no room for the intrusive thoughts of not being “enough.” In those moments, clinging to a rock face, all that mattered was the next move, the next moment.

Climbing immediately offered a sense of community. I could feel the support from strangers behind me, all hollering, “You got this!” as my hand stretched toward the next hold. I was smitten with the excitement of new friends and adventures. It did not take long until I found myself building out a bed in my candy-apple-red Transit Connect van and hitting the road.

In 2020, between civil rights protests and a global pandemic, life as we knew it changed. A friend invited me to a meetup for climbers of color in Denver. Aware of my racial ambiguity, I was not sure where I fit in. After being rejected by so many of my white peers, I was not sure if I would be accepted by my BIPOC peers. Still, I found a sense of affinity within the space. When those meetups ended, Jalen Bazile encouraged me to continue what he’d started. That autumn, Menesha Mannapperuma and

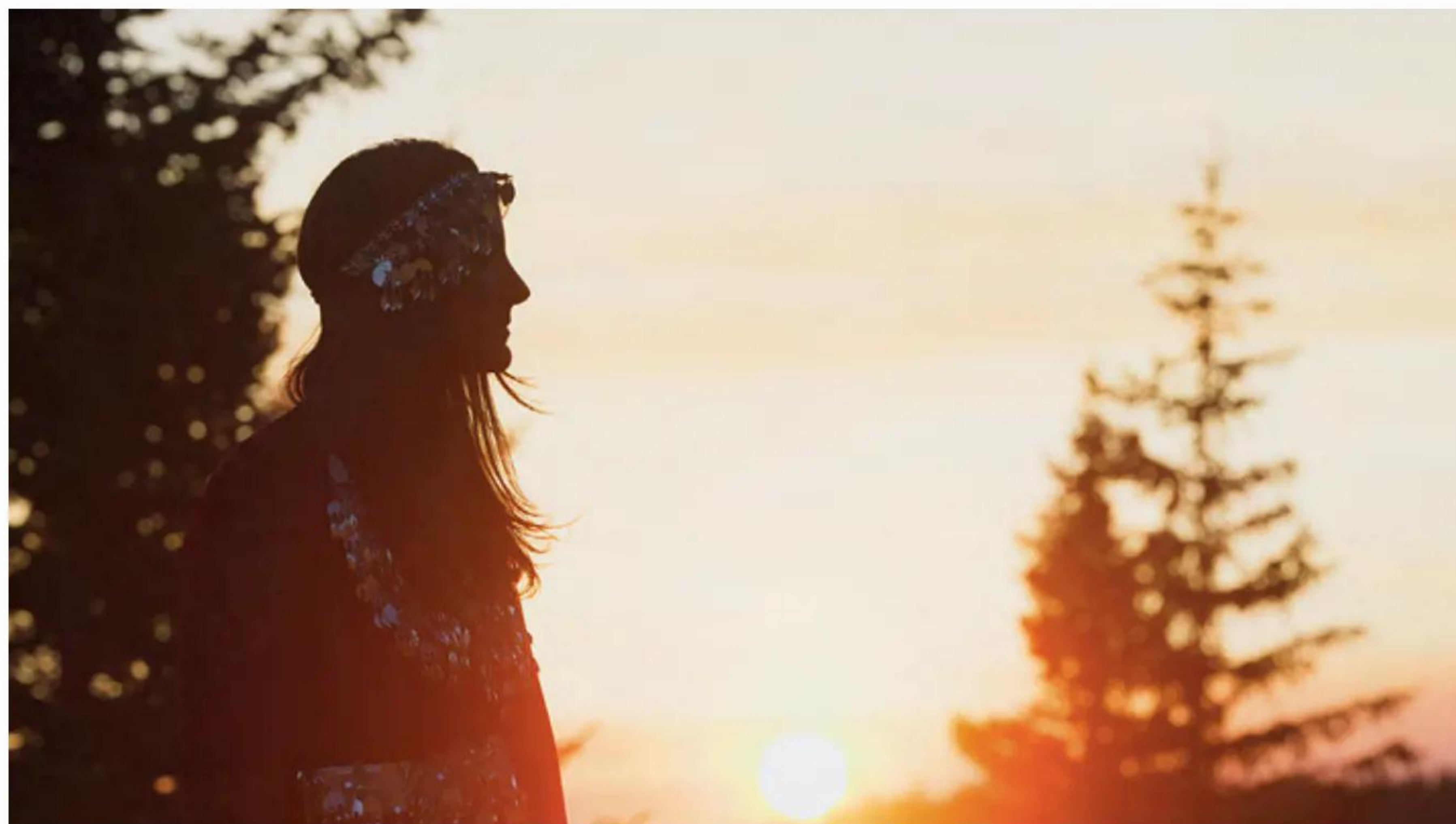
I founded Cruxing in Color (CIC), a meetup group with the mission to connect, support and empower self-identified climbers of color in the Denver area.

The essence of CIC shines brightest during our monthly meetups at gyms across the Colorado Front Range, drawing fifty to 150 climbers each night. The meetups are a melting pot of ages and skill levels, supporting everyone from first-time climbers to professional athletes. Take a look around and you’ll see Bhargavi Korlipara and Joaquin Nagle teaching a small group of new climbers about bouldering safety. Nearby, Michael Reitmeyer is handing out new climbing shoes from a donation bin while Nina Williams and Darius Phillips exchange beta.

In 2021, a friend encouraged me to apply to the first annual Scarpa Athlete Mentorship Initiative. Pushing down my self-doubt, I filled out the application. The program focuses on mentorship opportunities for marginalized climbers creating change in their communities, while also providing athletes with guidance and insights from seasoned professionals, fostering skill development and industry knowledge. I was shocked when I received the acceptance email, almost forgetting I had applied.

Toward the middle of the program, we were asked to choose a capstone project. Though I had personal climbing goals, I decided my project would be to put together a large fundraiser for the CIC community. I worked frantically to organize the one-night event, emailing potential partners during my fifteen-minute breaks between lessons with my preschoolers.

Two days before our big fundraiser night, my phone pinged. My brows furrowed as I read a strange Instagram notification: a message from an account called “Secrets of Climbing.” I





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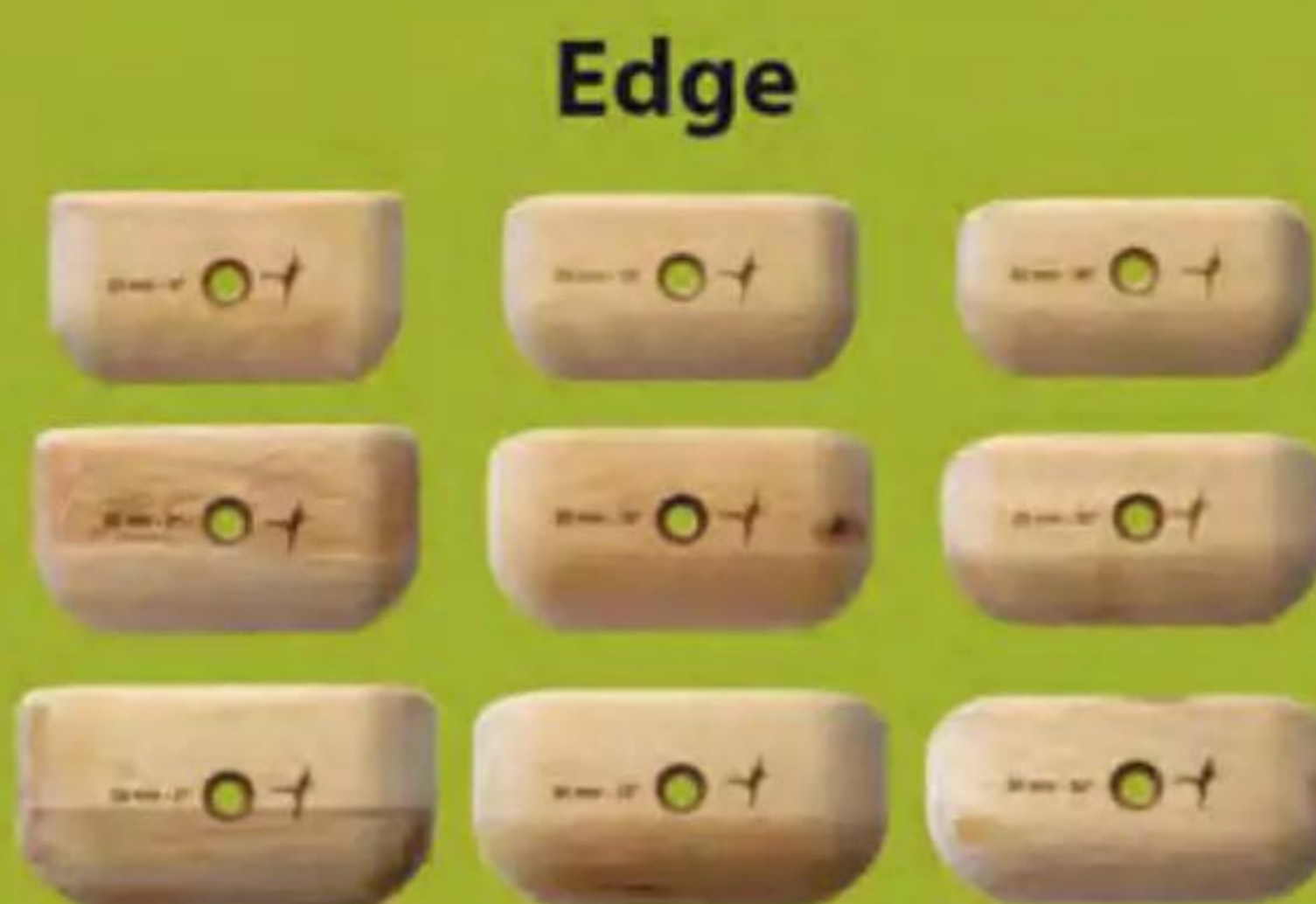
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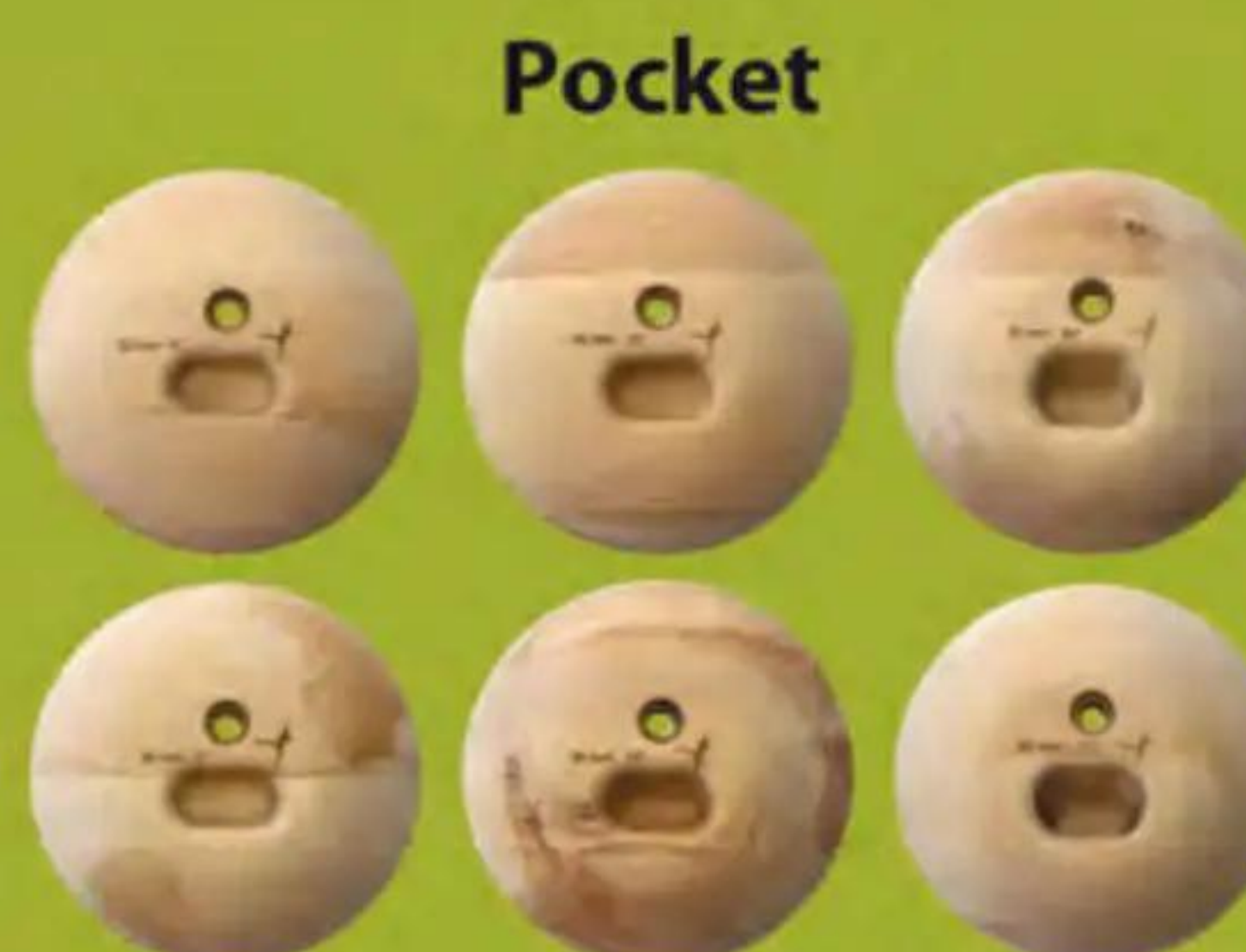
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tapped the screen and saw a story that someone had posted. My stomach dropped as I began to process what I was seeing. Plastered across the screen was a photo of my family at my brother's wedding; a fellow woman of color in the climbing community had taken a screenshot of the image from my Instagram account. Below the image was a poll asking her 21,000 followers to vote on whether my family was white or not. She went on to suggest I should not be calling myself a person of color, let alone leading an affinity group for fellow people of color.

I surveyed the photo, taking in the familiar smiles. *It must be the nose*, I thought. Suddenly I felt vulnerable about the part of my body I had permanently changed to escape racism, only to be the target of the same hatred from the opposite side. I clicked on her profile. We had never met. Shame, hurt, confusion and anger swirled so quickly that it became difficult to tell the emotions apart. *You will never belong. Give up*, my internal voice boomed.

Even as I worked to build a community to ensure everyone felt like they had somewhere to belong, I had to fight the feeling that somehow I still did not. Even as I changed my physical body to protect myself from racism, I was not safe from it. The thoughts crept in: *Am I the right person to do this work?* Restless, I lay awake and picked up the weight of every mistake I had ever made. I wanted to call off the fundraiser and let CIC fade away.

As I sat with my feelings, I remembered how easy it is to point out the flaws you see in a stranger. It's just as easy to criticize something you think you'd do differently without ever trying it for yourself first. But if someone tries a new route for the first time, chances are they may misread the beta. They may go left when they should go right. They may get to an unknown section and have to work through it. They may have to ask for help. They may adjust. When you see someone working on a route you've never tried, would you hurl criticisms at them from the ground while they try a sequence that you think you'd do differently? Would you tell them they never should have even tried it in the first place? I bet you would not. So why is it different off the wall?

Instead of pointing out someone's flaws, how much more impressive is it to point out their success? As I looked at the images from our meetups and read the reflections from our attendees, I was reminded how important CIC was for the community in Colorado. I

When I reflect on the term “climbing community,” I can't help but question its breadth. Does the mere act of climbing bind us into a unified community?

was reminded that the best person to be doing the work is simply the person willing to do it. I shook off my imposter syndrome and continued onward.

A few days later, our fundraiser earned about \$11,000 and clocked 1,100 check-ins, marking the largest turnout up to that point at Movement RiNo, including their grand opening. As the clock crept closer to the closing hour at the gym, the community moved next door to have drinks and extend the night. I stayed behind for a moment with a tired smile creeping across my face. I knew I was stronger now, my skin thicker. I would no longer crumble easily under the judgment of others.

Today, Cruxing in Color is an official 501(c)(3) that offers free outdoor educational clinics, gear and community events. Thanks to my co-founder, Menesha, we have a scholarship program for gym memberships that has served forty-five climbers in the greater Denver area.

We all know that climbing offers indisputable mental, physical and emotional benefits that everyone deserves to access. But, as CIC climber Sade Adeyemi shared in a feedback form, “It is so easy to feel like a space is not meant for you when you're such an obvious outsider.” That is why CIC creates an intersectional space for underrepresented folks in the community to feel seen, supported and empowered to take up the space they deserve without having to change themselves. CIC is not here to tell people what they need. Instead, it creates a container and works from within it, adjusting its efforts to meet the needs of our community. In another feedback request, Sushia Rahimizadeh reflected, “I've been climbing in Colorado for 6 years but it wasn't until Cruxing in Color that I actually felt like

a real climber.” Monica Adela added, “I am incredibly grateful for the environment that CIC is creating and for all the people I have met who make me feel welcome and encourage my growth. They empower me to do it on my own but also support me so I don't have to do it alone.” We know how important it is to provide access to mentorship within our sport, but we also know that most folks who come to our meetups are seeking something beyond climbing. If we are talking about freedom for people of color, the first step is feeling the freedom to be themselves.

CLIMBING CAN FEEL LIKE an international language that transcends words. Or like a magnet, with so many of us drawn to the pursuit. Still, the climbing community, like any other, is not immune to the undercurrents of societal biases. Ego, gatekeeping and elitism cast a shadow over it. As I stepped deeper into the climbing world, more shadows emerged.

In June 2022, I had just pulled into a dusty parking lot in Vedauwoo, Wyoming, to meet friends when a guy driving a beat-up van rolled in behind me.

“Are you gonna move?” the man asked two women parked next to me. “I'm a local.” As he moved past them, he shifted his focus onto me and he asked again, “So ... are you gonna move?”

My eyes hardened, looking past two other men who were chuckling in the vehicle to meet the driver's eyes. I asked him plainly, “What gives you more of a right to be here than I do?” He scoffed as his van rolled forward to park in an open space just a few cars down. One of his friends approached me and told me to “leave him alone.”

In early September 2023, I experienced a similar confrontation, but this time it was from someone behind a computer. In Wyoming's Ten Sleep Canyon, I had been working the crux of my project, Ministry of Magic (5.13a/b), on top rope. The crux between the second and fifth bolts features a series of precise tic-tac movements on razor-thin limestone crimps and rounded, smeary edges. On September 11, I felt ready to redpoint. I tied in and got on belay.

“You can do this,” I whispered as I moved past the second bolt. I shifted my weight, placed my foot in a narrow pocket and sprung upward to latch the next small hold before gravity could catch up to me. Climbing



[Photo] A Cruising in Color event sponsored by Arc'teryx and Denver Mountain Guiding offered a free day of climbing on crags above Golden, Colorado. James Lucas

higher, I reached a stance where I could shake out my tired arms. From there, I moved into a two-finger pocket before finding the hidden monopocket to clip. After two more bolts, I paused to refocus, knowing I could still fall. All my senses dialed in as time seemed to stretch. There was a quiet power in the moment—pushing myself so hard, yet feeling calm as I climbed toward the anchors, completing my first redpoint at the 5.13 grade. I smiled as I noticed the canyon leaves shifting from green to yellow, signaling the arrival of a new season. I exhaled deeply, savoring the moment.

Unfortunately, the peace was fleeting. The next day, a climber in the canyon who had also projected the route heard about my send and accused me of not climbing it “correctly.” I had used a stick-clip to protect the start of the climb. “Don’t be a top rope hero. Clip all the bolts for the full glory. It is certainly not unsafe, especially if you climb at the grade,” the woman sprayed on the online forum MountainProject.com before changing her rating from 5.13a to 5.12d. It was personal. I reported the comment as harassment and it was deleted. But when I first read it, my mind raced back to the Indy 500, to yearning for a sense of safety in my own country, yet feeling like I was not a true American. Similarly, I longed for security on the wall, only to be told I was not a genuine climber. *See? You will never be enough*, my internal voice jabbed.

I took a deep breath as the pain threatened to take root inside of me. In the quiet, the unwavering support of the community I had built surrounded me, and I felt my inner

strength surge. Suddenly, I was back in the sweltering heat of Indiana in 2011. I was standing alongside my younger self; beer dripped down her face, thick with the weight of the words—“Go back to your country”—that would linger in the air for the rest of her life. I reached for the hand of my young self, locked eyes with the racist stranger and together, we confronted him: *My people do not have a country. They belong to the cradle of civilization, long before your people even had the thought to colonize the land you now gatekeep. Ancient gods sculpted my body but men like you taught me to hate it. My people are in diaspora, existing as a minority on their native land, and disappearing into history books. The Middle East is not made of terrorists. It’s filled with people like my mom and dad who would have fed you, clothed you and called you family.*

IN THE FIVE YEARS since I started climbing, I’ve traversed landscapes both internal and external. Hailing from the Assyrian tribes of Tyari and Qudshanis, I come from a line of warriors renowned for their bravery and unwavering determination. My people roamed the ancient landscape of the Middle East. Today in the United States, many Assyrians find themselves living apart from their families, seeking a sense of belonging in a society that praises individualism while paradoxically rewarding conformity. Still, amid this dichotomy, one truth remains steadfast: we are not meant to navigate this journey alone.

For me, the climbing community has been a light in the darkness—a lifeline that

granted me a second chance. But it’s important to acknowledge that within that same space exist the people who have torn me down or harmed me. So when I reflect on the term “climbing community,” I can’t help but question its breadth. Does the mere act of climbing bind us into a unified community? Should we glorify a community that provides healing and simultaneously inflicts suffering?

I have realized that a shared hobby or lifestyle does not equate to shared values, and that is OK. Rather than identifying with the greater climbing community, I’ve understood that you can find microcommunities within it. I’ve learned that trying hard is fun, but being a valued climber in the community should be less about your performance on the wall and more about the way you show up on the ground.

TOO OFTEN, I ENCOUNTER climbers who only measure success by the grade they climb and the routes they send. I have heard the question countless times: “So ... did you send?”

I found myself reflecting on the question as I hiked out after a long day at the crag. My eyes softened as I returned to the present moment and took a second to absorb the words. I understand what the question asks: Did I clip the chains without falling?

Those details suddenly felt unimportant as I thought back on the day ... The strength I felt in my legs on the way up the steep approach trail. The sweat dripping from my forehead, feeding the wildflowers below me. Catching sight of sage grouse taking flight in the breeze while laughter reverberated among friends, both new and old. The growing trust in my belayer as I confronted my fear of falling. My fingers stinging against the sharp edges of cold limestone while I moved instinctively on the rock.

I tucked those feelings into the back of my mind, carrying them with me as I left the crag and returned to society. *Did I send?* My eyes refocused.

“Yes.”

[Resources for anyone who is struggling with thoughts of suicide or who is concerned about someone who might need help can be found 24/7 by calling or texting the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988.—Ed.]



THE ALPINIST PODCAST

SEASON 22

We love hearing about hard sends—the jams, the smears, the sweat that goes into reaching the tops of routes. But even more important are the personalities pulling it off. In this season, host Abbey Collins digs deeper into the people behind the climbs.



Climbing Isn't Everything with Beth Rodden

At the height of her career Beth Rodden established herself as one of the best rock climbers in the world. But while she was making headlines for scaling some of the hardest routes in Yosemite, Rodden was also quietly struggling in the aftermath of a traumatic experience. Rodden shares her story, as it's documented in her new memoir, *A Light Through the Cracks*.



Other Everests with Jonathan Westaway, Peter Hansen and Sarah Pickman

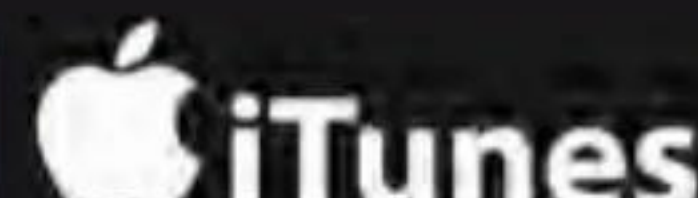
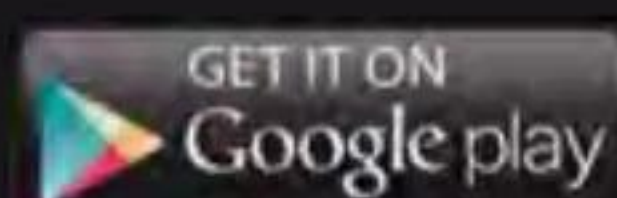
This year marks the hundredth anniversary of the 1924 British Mt. Everest Expedition, and the disappearance of George Mallory and Sandy Irvine. Now, a group of scholars and climbers is shedding light on the people and ideas who have traditionally been left out of stories about Chomolungma. *Other Everests* tells stories from new perspectives—of people and things that have long been overlooked.



The Best Climber in the World with Rick Accomazzo

Rick Accomazzo came of age in the climbing world as part of the Stonemasters—a name adopted by a group of friends largely climbing in Yosemite, Tahquitz and Suicide Rocks in the 1970s. Five decade later, his new book *Tobin, the Stonemasters, and Me* tells the story of Accomazzo's friend Tobin Sorenson—perhaps, as Accomazzo claims, the best climber in the world.

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patagonia

LOCAL HERO

James Lucas on Shannon Joslin

In 2021, Shannon Joslin climbed up the southwest face of Yosemite's Liberty Cap. Seventy feet above the Valley, she swung in toward a tall flake, where she saw thousands of Mexican free-tailed bats hanging upside down from the rock. The sight thrilled her.

The thirty-four-year-old doctor of population genetics, who lives in El Portal, California, first came to Yosemite for the bouldering. An obsessive climber, she spent years investigating the national park's boulders, documenting the blocks. "Climbing used to be my only thing," she said.

In 2014, between route-setting for national competitions and climbing Camp 4's slab problems, Joslin broke the hamate bone in her left wrist. Just shy of five feet two, she'd relied too heavily on her crimping strength. Unable to climb, Joslin continued to explore the undocumented areas below Bridalveil Fall and along the Merced River, a practice she'd begun in 2013. As she talked with local boulderers, she discovered the area's rich oral history and realized that without documentation it could be lost. Hearing that I was working on a guidebook, Joslin suggested a collaboration.

For six years, Joslin and I walked the boulders of the Valley, drawing maps, recording ascents and building a framework for the guide. The book acted as an outlet for Joslin to fixate on while her hand healed, and it was another way to preserve the nature of Yosemite. She sought to record it all.

"Climbers just look at videos on their phones," Joslin said, describing technology dependence and environmental disconnection. "I also realize that's the way things are going but there are places, like Yosemite, where we can resist."

After printing *Yosemite Bouldering* in 2020, Joslin began working with Ed Hartouni and Eric Gabel on a comprehensive route guide to the Valley. By consolidating the history into a book, Joslin hopes to encourage climbers to get on new routes while also exploring the environment around them.

In the autumn of 2021, Joslin moved beyond the boulders by revitalizing the Big Wall Bat Program. The program studies how Yosemite National Park's seventeen species of bats utilize the area's cracks, chimneys and alcoves.

On summer evenings bats swoop over El Cap Meadow eating moths, beetles and mosquitoes. These gardeners of the night, in Yosemite and throughout the country, save the US \$23 billion a year in pesticide use

within a sixty-mile radius of their roosts. Bats residing in Yosemite could easily forage in the agricultural lands of the Central Valley. They pollinate numerous crops, including agave plants, a key tequila ingredient. They also serve as a food source for peregrine falcons. Despite bats' importance to the ecosystem, relatively little is known about them.

What is known is that white-nose syndrome has been killing thousands of North American bats each year. An itchy fungus grows on an infected bat's wings and nose. During the winter, the fungus spreads and the bat must expend energy to heat its body to come out of hibernation,

clean itself and then lower its body temperature again. Repeating this process too many times uses all the energy stores in a bat's body and causes the bats to starve. The fungus spreads through contact with other infected bats and surfaces in the areas where they're hibernating, as well as from humans, who can carry the fungus on their shoes, clothes or equipment.

Since the fungus was found in nearby Inyo County, Joslin and her colleagues have worked to better understand its impact. They began by cataloging where bats roost, which can be a herculean task considering they roost in everything from tree bark to granite cracks to building fissures. Joslin climbed El Capitan via Zodiac, Lurking Fear and Tangerine Trip searching for

the tiny mammals. In 2021, a bat sighting on the Rostrum prompted Joslin to rappel from the top; she eventually found a huge roost in a crack. In the spring of 2024, Joslin set up a Motus tower, which documents location information from tagged bats, birds and insects.

"There's a lot of active pursuit without knowing what the outcome will be," Joslin said of chasing bats, which can be reported in one area and then gone the next day. She likened this to her climbing and guidebook writing: "You have an idea but that doesn't guarantee that you'll have success." But for Joslin, those attempts have resulted in protecting Yosemite's climbing and the creatures that share the cliffs.



[This Page] **The author, James Lucas, in December 2023.** James Lucas | [Facing Page] **Shannon Joslin takes a break from bouldering in Yosemite in the spring of 2024.**

Joslin has degrees in genetics and genomics from the University of California, Davis. Her previous studies included research into feline genetics. Ryan Moon





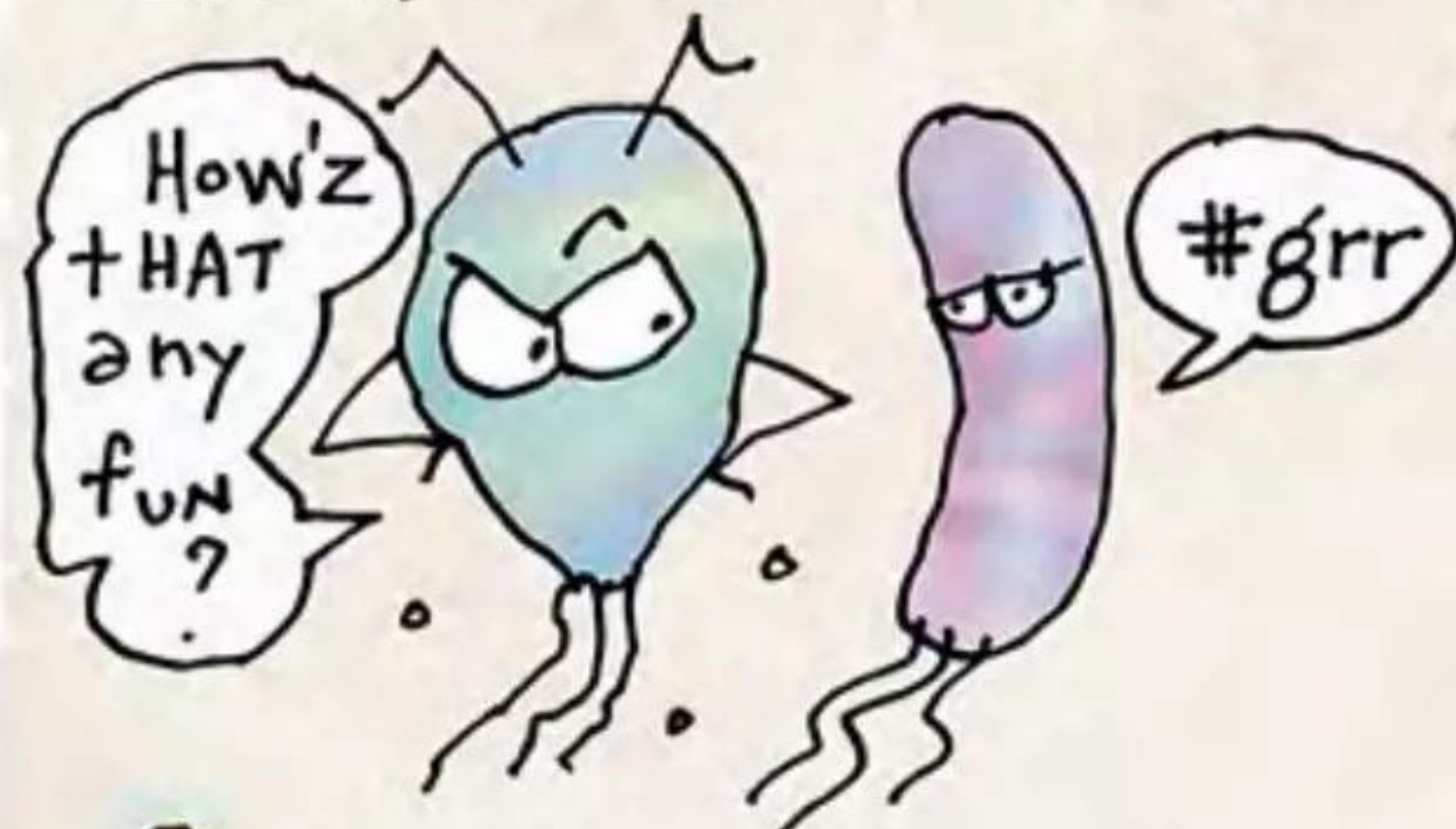
50 SHADES of BROWN

© R. Knight



USE A LEAKPROOF BAG OR POOP TUBE...

PRO NASTY Bacteria stay out of clean water sources



PRO THIS won't happen on a rock climb!



PRO LEAVES NO TRACE



PRO Merit!

I'm FLUSHED with JOY!

CON Aim issues...



CON LEAKS!



PRO No More l'il green baggies!



CON CLEANIN' the TUBE



Thirty.

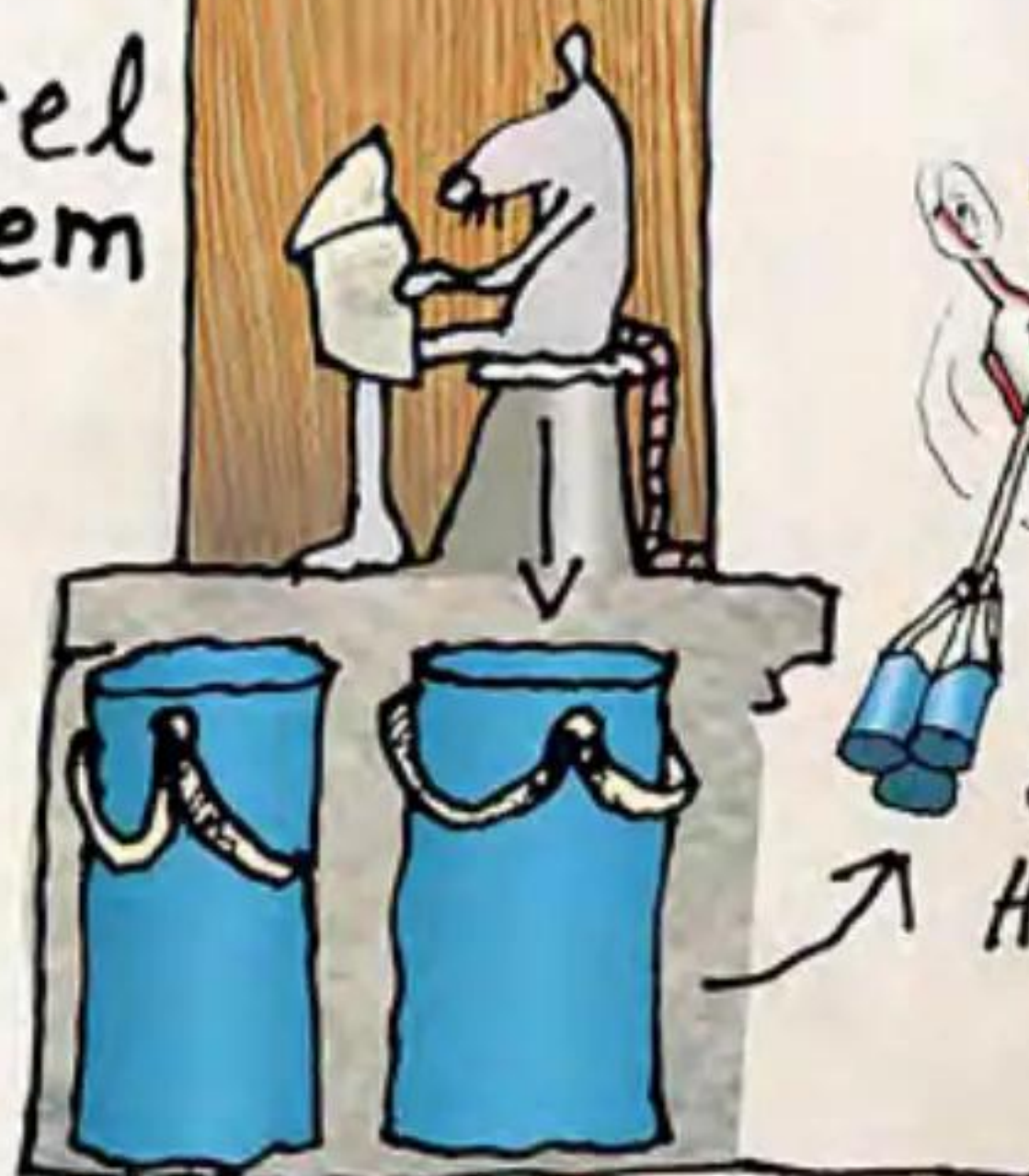


LATEST TOILET TECH PROVIDES PLEASURABLE POOPING...

PRO Composting solar toilet

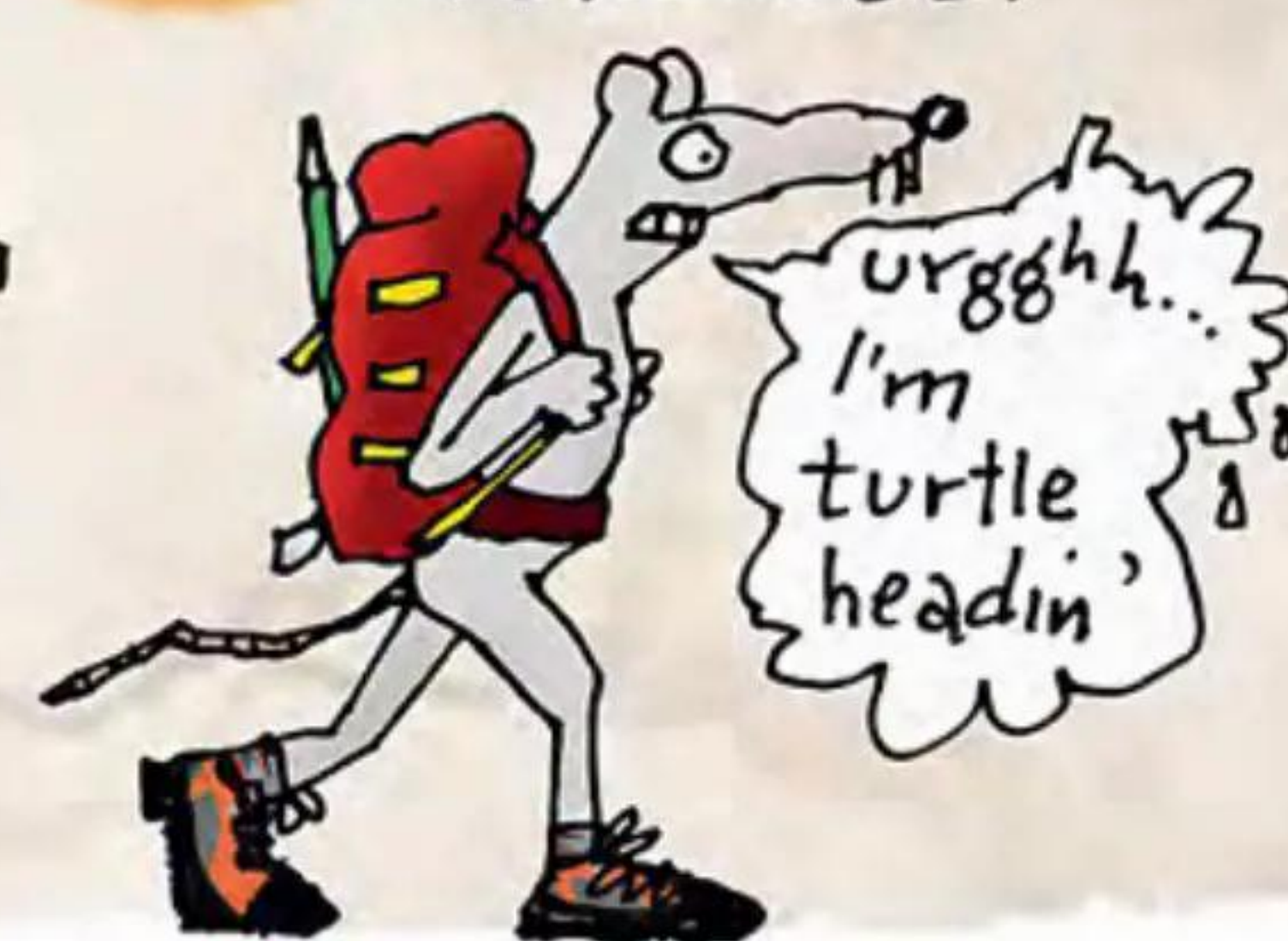


PRO Barrel system



Full barrels are whisked away to a Honey Wagon!

CON Too far between outhouses.



PRO Poo with a view!



PRO Some outhouses separate pee from poo...



CON Vandalism



CON NO OUTHOUSES ON BIG WALLS



POOPIN' OUTSIDE IS COMPLICATED!!



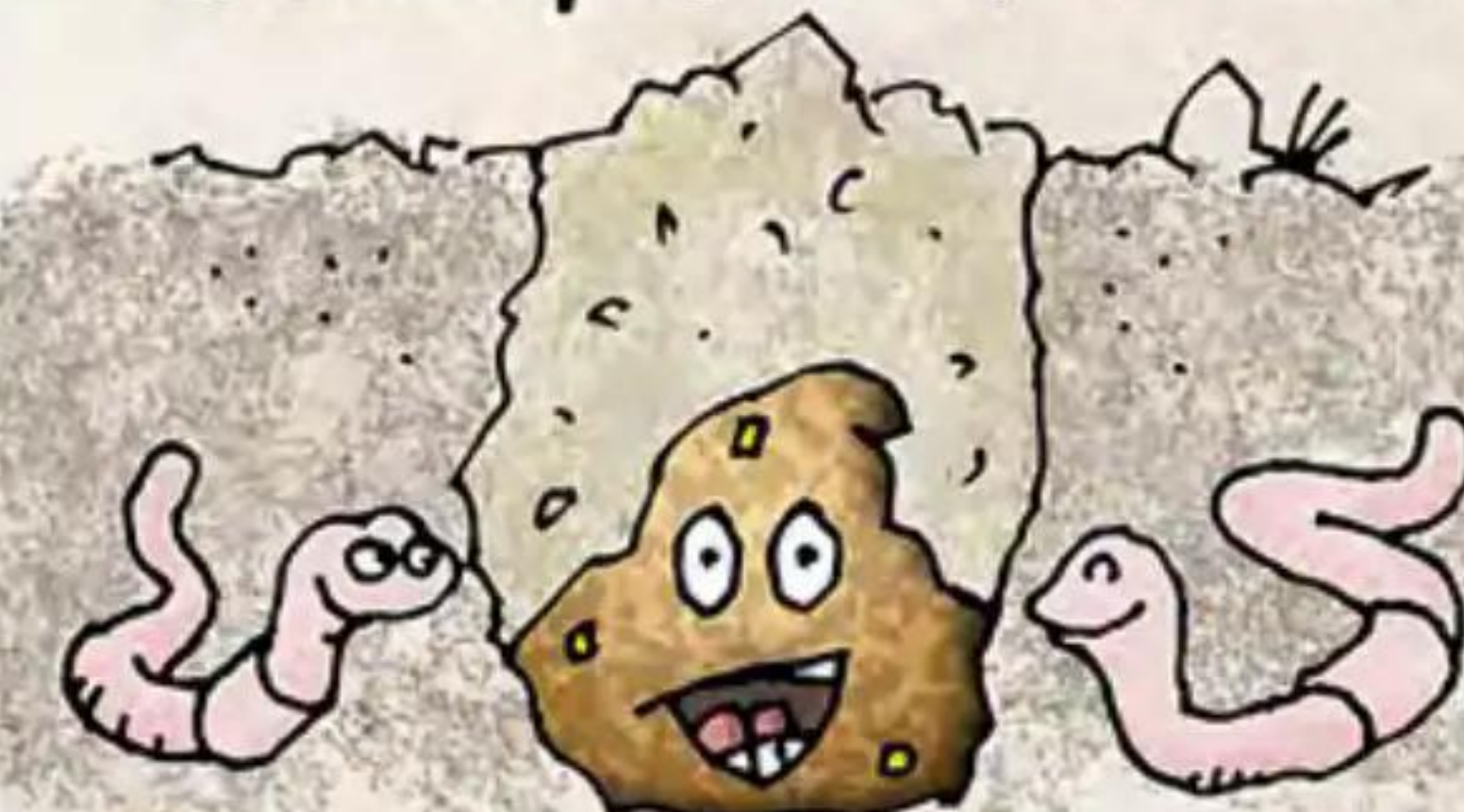
DIG A CAT HOLE
*PACK out yer T.P.

BURY POO 6" (15cm) DEEP & 200' (65m) from WATER SOURCES!

PRO Properly placed poo in a cat hole decomposes into soil.

PRO Yer NOT carryin' that shit around.

PRO LEAVE NO TRACE proponents recommend cat holes



CON Group camping
SSS QUEEEEEZZE

CON Some places are undiggable.

CON Some nasty bacteria will persist in soils.



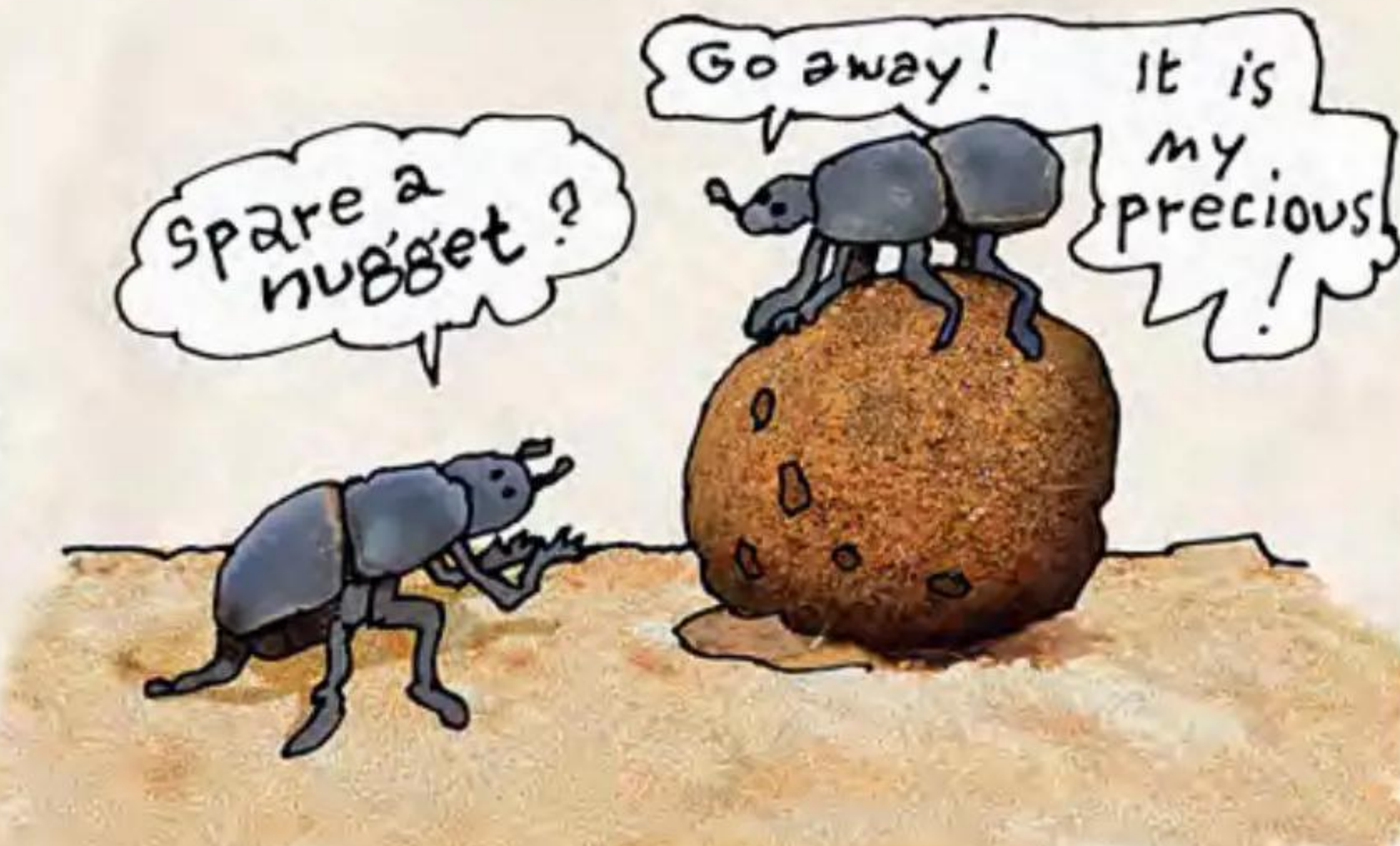
OH, CRAP!

NO OUTHOUSE? CAN'T PACK IT OUT? HARD NO ON DIGGIN'!?

CON Plannin' a climb? Consider poo management!

CON Smear yer poo on a rock like yer spreadin' Peanut butter on toast!

CON Leave poo where it will NEVER be found.... (even by dung beetles)



- KEY FACTS** *regarding global sanitation...
- ONLY 57% of people have access to safely managed sanitation services.
 - 419 MILLION people defecate in the open using street gutters, bushes or bodies of water.
 - POOR SANITATION reduces human well-being and social & economic development.

*who.int 2020&2022 stats



The mountain people.

The mountains are our meeting place.

Where we discover new routes together,
and bonds are formed on the summit.

DOLOMITES, ITALY | 46.5647° N, 11.7775° E
PHOTOGRAPHY: GREG BOSWELL